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UTTERLY MISTAKEN

BY

ANNIE THOMAS

AUTHOR OF "THAT OTHER WOMAN," "TWO WIDOWS," "SHE LOVED HIM," "PLAYING FOR HIGH STAKES," "LOVE'S A TYRANT," "HE COMETH NOT, SHE SAID," "CALLED TO ACCOUNT," "BEST FOR HER," ETC., ETC.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	"It was a Woman!"	1
II.	"I have Lived!"	9
III.	Sir Walter,	17
IV.	Under Electric Light,	26
V.	The Lyn's Lullaby,	34
VI.	Laura is Reminiscent,	43
VII.	A Young Avenger,	53
VIII.	Laura "Clinches" It,	62
IX.	Mrs. Davis Sees Visions,	71
X.	"On Border-Land, 'Twixt Hate and Love,"	80
XI.	"So Highly Respected,"	89
XII.	Mrs. Greg,	97
XIII.	Bound for Trelyn,	103
XIV.	On Thin Ice,	111
XV.	"I was an Ass,"	121
XVI.	That Meredith Girl,	130
XVII.	Careless and Curious,	137
XVIII.	Marian is Satisfied,	148
XIX.	"I am Your Mother,"	157
XX.	Broken and Contrite,	165
XXI.	With the Stream,	173
XXII.	Robert's Return,	182

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIII.	A New Net,	191
XXIV.	"I can't Grieve,"	199
XXV.	A Hard Task,	209
XXVI.	Very Human,	219
XXVII.	"The Mother Came Across,"	228
XXVIII.	Not Wise, but Womanly,	235
XXIX.	Brief Brightness,	244
XXX.	Poor Woman,	253
XXXI.	Unconventional,	262
XXXII.	A Woman's Voice,	268
XXXIII.	"But a Man,"	275
XXXIV.	False Lights,	284
XXXV.	"Will You?"	292

UTTERLY MISTAKEN.

CHAPTER I.

"IT WAS A WOMAN!"

"LYNTON on its hill, Lynmouth in its hole. It is so hard to free one's self from the fascination which each of these bits of Arcadia exercise over one that were it not for the Cliff Railway life here would become an unbearable effort to taste the sweets of both."

It was a woman who said these words—a woman who had tasted the sweets of life in many another bit of Arcadia, as well as in some of the most joyous cities of the world—a woman to whom many of the most amusing denizens in the beautiful city of Prague were well known, and yet, notwithstanding her charming experiences of Bohemianism, a woman who was now well contented to be what some of her friends termed "buried alive by the sea at Lynmouth."

For on the day on which this story opens, it was blue unclouded weather, a golden day in one of the most faultless summers that have been vouchsafed to us of late years.

Moreover, the one who listened to her was a man, the only man who had aroused a genuine interest in her heart during all the thirty odd years of her sojourn upon earth.

They had been sauntering down the little esplanade which starts from the Rhenish tower and ends abreast of the Cliff Railway; when she spoke, and when he answered, they

were midway up the almost perpendicular cliff which that railway scales. What he said then was:

"I have known Lynton and Lynmouth for the last ten years. Neither of them exercised the slightest fascination over me—till to-day."

He emphasized his last words with a steady, searching look at her, but though she saw and felt the look, she neither by word nor sign betrayed that she had the faintest comprehension of its meaning, nor suffered the slightest embarrassment from its intensity. Her long, dark-lashed gray eyes looked back at him unfalteringly, unfeelingly, he thought. Her delicately mobile mouth, that he had already discovered quivered with every variation of its owner's most variable emotions, was at its most composed rest now.

"Is she cold and hard? or only a consummate actress?" he asked himself as the railway car glided to its bourn at the top of the cliff, and he held his hand out to assist his fellow-passenger to alight. But she was engaged in collecting her sunshade, guidebook, purse, and ticket, and so either did not see or could not take the extended hand.

There was the faintest expression of surprise about her eyebrows as he, after hesitating for an instant, walked along by her side, accommodating his pace to hers with the evident intention of at least escorting her up into Lynton's principal street, and that this should be his intention annoyed her. She was one of the few women who detest being sought, flattered, and followed, unless she had permitted a man to see that it was agreeable to her that he should do these things. No such grace as this had she extended to the man at her side. All that was masculine in the nature incased in that exquisitely feminine form rose in revolt at the successful opposition of his will to hers on this occasion. His mastery over her was brief however, for as they came out into the street from the cliff lane she

halted, and without giving him either her hand or a smile, said :

"If I could sketch I should envy you the color-sensations you will have presently. I know how Wooda Bay looks on a morning like this."

"Why not drive out and see it for yourself? I want you to advise me, really I do! I can't make up my mind which is the best view of Ley Abbey. You'd hit on it at once, and save me both time and trouble."

"At the cost of wasting my own! Time is a thing I never waste, if I can help it. Trouble is a thing I never take—for anyone but myself. Good-morning!"

She nodded carelessly and walked on, and he stood looking after her, admiring her well-developed figure, slender limbs, and highbred points.

"She steps like a duchess on those slim little feet, and carries her handsome little head like one, too! She makes me hate her with her confounded airs of ignoring my existence, and yet—— Well, I'm an ass to hanker after her smiles and her presence, for even if she were willing I wouldn't tie myself up to such a prettily perfect piece of selfishness for all the world could offer me. Good-by to you, Mrs. Poynter! Don't be afraid that I shall try to make you waste any more time and trouble about me."

He had turned and was walking slowly and reluctantly toward the Valley of Rocks, of which he had promised himself that he would make a series of sketches this morning. His chance meeting with a woman whom he believed to be in Algiers, at the Rhenish tower just now, had quenched his ardor for sketching and rekindled his ardor for her. It has been shown how his infirmity of purpose was rewarded.

"She must be thirty-three or four if she's a day," he told himself. "What's the good of reminding myself of *that*, though! Every year she owns to has given her a new

charm or perfected an old one. They say she was lovely at twenty! she's that now, and that's the least of her attractions. Where the devil *does* the fascination come in? for she doesn't try to please or make me think about her!"

He was a fine-made, well set up fellow of thirty-five who thought this, a man who, although not a soldier, had seen a good deal of hard fighting on the recent battlefields of the world as war correspondent to the three or four of our foremost dailies. His pen had made him honored and renowned, but it had not made him rich. Plenty of money had been made, but even more had been spent, for Guy St. Austle came of an open-handed race, and he was continually forgetting that it was his brother, Sir Walter, who had the title, estates, and family money bags. On the whole it was not astonishing that he should sometimes have allowed his memory to play him false on this point, for Sir Walter was his senior by three minutes only, and during their childhood and youth the twins had shared alike, and no difference had been made in the treatment they received from parents, friends, and satellites.

But when their father died there came a change. Sir Walter did not alter to Guy, but Guy altered to himself and everyone around him. His brother was not only anxious to continue the allowance Guy had always received from their father, but to add to it in a princely way. But Guy would have none of it. He did not pose as an injured man and a martyr, but he went cheerfully away from the luxurious home and equally luxurious club life with nothing but the proceeds of the sale of his own favorite mare in his pocket, and when his family heard of him again it was as "that plucky beggar St. Austle, a fellow who was always to the front, whose graphic accounts of 'the war day by day' in the *Universal Circulator* seemed to bring the battlefields into our very midst."

After this his professional paths were those of pleasant-

ness to him. The highbred gentleman not only held a graceful and vigorous pen, but he was as well versed in the arts of peace as he was in those of war, as much at home in clubland as he was under canvas on the tented field. Consequently his contributions to magazine and journalistic literature were caught up as quickly as he could write them. Still he did not make money, or rather he could not keep what he made. It flew through his fingers as fast as his pen flew over the paper. But however hard up he might find himself at times, he preferred the temporary embarrassment to accepting any of the pecuniary aid which his brother eagerly pressed on him.

Five years before he came into this story at Lynmouth he had made the great blunder of his life. He had fallen in what he thought was love with a girl who was a revelation to him in the way of loveliness. Some time after she was an even greater revelation to him in the way of fatuous silliness, but in the meantime he had spoken out not only to her, but to her people, and these latter held him as if he had been in a vise.

Luckily for him marriage was out of the question when they were first engaged, as there was no war on, and his other engagements were not sufficiently remunerative for him to embark upon the matrimonial sea with a wife who fancied that silken sails were the only ones she could cruise under. More luckily still, when a war did break out it was in a country that was pregnant with the seeds of every kind of known fever, and his Laura suffered agonies of fear that his letters might convey the fatal taint to her. Urged on by this fear she made a magnanimous proposal to the effect that they should not correspond during his absence, the truth being that in addition to the terror she was in of contagion from his letters she was oppressed by the dour doubt that he would discover her to be the mere pretty puff-ball she was if she wrote and he had time to read hers.

It did not occur to her that he had already made the discovery, so she was slightly chagrined when he assented to her proposition without demur. Her mother offered to receive and fumigate letters for her, but to this Guy St. Austle would not agree. Her eldest brother, too, bearing in mind the fact that Sir Walter St. Austle was still a bachelor, offered himself as a medium. But Guy was stanch to himself. "There could be no mediumship between himself and a woman he loved," he said; "between them it must be hand to hand, lip to lip, heart to heart." Laura Davis shrugged her well-draped shoulders when she heard this, and assured her anxious brother that there "would be no hand-to-hand or lip-to-lip business between them after Guy came home till she was quite, *quite* certain that he had been thoroughly disinfected."

"Pray God deliver me from evil—and fools!" he said as he stepped on board the old trooper by which he had obtained a passage out from Portsmouth. He took out Laura's photograph presently and looked at it, and tried to set his pulses beating at sight of her perfectly colored, shaped, and clothed beauty. But his pulses would not obey him. "Yet I loved her madly for a week or two," he thought scornfully—of himself. Then he put the photograph away in haste and disgust, thinking vexedly and disappointedly:

"The d—d nuisance of it is I shall never love as madly and happily again. She's spoilt that for me."

His fine physique carried him through all malarial dangers till nearly the end of the campaign. Then he fell ill, so ill that he nearly lost the life which that illness made worth living. There were paragraphs in the English journals about his alarming condition, of course, and these were pointed out to Laura by her watchful friends. Simultaneously another paragraph concerning the St. Austles appeared in the London dailies: "Sir Walter St. Austle, Bart., is about

to lead to the hymeneal altar Mabel, only daughter of Pierce Robins, Esq., of Manchester. It is reported that the bride will bring to her husband a fortune of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, in addition to her large share in the Warlington Mill factory." Miss Laura Davis read the two paragraphs with commendable attention, and then with delicate tact referred to the one that concerned Guy only.

"It will be a great relief to Mr. St. Austle to know that I am not worrying and fussing myself into an illness about him," she said calmly to her brother, "so it would be nice of you, Robert, to send him a line telling him that he is quite a free man as far as I am concerned, and that I had rather not hear anything more about him after this, and anything else nice that you can think of, you know."

"His chances are dished for the baronetcy and money!" her brother remarked gloomily.

"Oh! I never thought of *that*," Laura replied glibly. "Now do write to him like a dear old boy to-day! It's so dreadful to have anything hanging over one's head. It may help him to turn the corner toward recovery if he hears that I am quite resigned, quite prepared not to worry myself a bit more about our silly little affair whether he lives or dies."

Laura had never made herself actively obnoxious to her family, but she had always been a beautiful dead weight upon the more active members of it. The vision of her consigned to the care and keeping of the St. Austles had been agreeable to the responsible members of the Davis family. Therefore there was something heroic in the attitude assumed by her eldest—and most responsible—brother now.

"I'll write and tell Guy St. Austle the decision you've come to, Laura, and 'pon my honor, if there's a spark of gratitude in human nature, the fellow ought to give me a pension for life for being the messenger of such good news."

She looked at him for a moment or two with big, beautiful, surprised blue eyes. Then she said quite unexcitedly:

"You mean he will be glad to get rid of me so easily? So he will be, but all the same he won't be able to get over the feeling for the girl he thought I was at first. But don't let us talk about him any more," she added hurriedly; "there may be fever, malarial fever! deadly fever! in the very mention of his name. I dislike all these subjects so much, danger and death! I've never put myself in the way of danger, and never courted the idea of death. He lives in an atmosphere of both, and he'll never have the family title or the family money, now that that twin-brother of his is going to be married. *Do* promise me you'll write and settle it as I wish to-day."

"I will, dear—and you?" her brother said quietly.

"I? Oh, don't trouble about me, Robert. Old Daunton will give you an extra share in the business the day I marry him, and he would marry me to-morrow if I liked."

"Then," said her brother, thinking of himself first, as we are all apt to do, "you're an infernal little fool if you don't like! Here goes for the letter to St. Austle," he added with admirably selfish promptitude and decision, and, sure enough, that night that letter went.

Guy St. Austle came out of his malarial fever and broken engagement a stronger man, physically and mentally, than when he had gone into them. He had expected great things in the way of debilitation, poisoning, and corroding from the climate, and the climate had not disappointed him. On the other hand, he had expected nothing that had any connection whatever with womanly dignity, fidelity, or sympathy from Laura Davis, and his scanty expectations were chillingly realized. He did not waste a sigh of regret on the thought of that beautiful body of hers with which he had been briefly enraptured. He had not a single thrilling thought of her garnered up in his mind. To him she

appeared now to have been nothing better than a beautiful, tasteless fruit! a marvelously well-wrought, artistic piece of waxwork, animated from within by a puerile set of uninteresting mechanical contrivances.

"And I've wasted my love on that thing!" he thought. "What shall I have to give if a real woman ever crosses my path!"

CHAPTER II.

"I HAVE LIVED!"

MRS. POYNTER did not attempt to deceive herself by any pretense of being glad that she had got rid of him when she sent him off to the Valley of Rocks to sketch, and pursued her way to the Lynton circulating library alone. But she was conscious of there being a lessened restraint upon her when she felt that he had marched out of sight in the opposite direction.

The works of fiction that were submitted to her for approval were numerous and good, but she had read the majority of them some seasons ago. She turned them aside, not impatiently or contemptuously, but with promptitude and decision, and went back to the counter, behind which the mistress of the establishment stood, saying, apologetically anxious: "I'm not difficult to please, nor do I suffer from want of purpose in making a selection," with a smile that made the mistress of the library commence unpacking the latest consignment of light literature from Mudie's at once; "but I'm afraid I must go away empty handed to-day. Your old novels have been my own familiar friends for years, and the later ones all deal with that 'young love' which is pretty enough in fiction, and pathetically silly in fact."

"I can recommend you some admirable sporting novels,

madam: 'The Girl in the Olive-green Wide-awake; 'Blue-habited Miss Brunker'; 'Her Flea-bitten Filly'; 'The Lost Leader, a Tandem Tale'; there's not much pathetically silly love in any of these, Mrs. Poynter."

"But there is even more pathetically spurious sport," Mrs. Poynter thought. However, she said nothing, but waited, turning over the leaves of a photograph album, while the librarian unpacked her new books.

"Here's something that's *new*, at any rate," the latter said presently, handing two volumes across to her customer. "Whether it will suit you, or is good, I can't say. I ordered it because the gentleman who wrote it is staying at the Lyndale Hotel, and one takes an interest in a book when one has seen the writer of it."

Mrs. Poynter took the volume, glanced at the title and author's name on the cover, and put it down, saying quietly:

"This, seasoned with a few others, will do. I will send my little maid for them by and by."

"He's a very fine-looking gentleman, this Mr. Guy St. Austle," the librarian continued, pursuing her own train of thought. "I've read in one of the society papers that interviewed him once that he's been hardly used by his family. They're very high, the St. Austles, and it seems he would go and get his experiences for writing in ways that didn't suit their pride. He went first for a common soldier, but it was soon found out that he was writing home the most beautiful accounts of the war to the papers, so he got his commission, and now his family receive him again."

Mrs. Poynter listened with pretty, flattering interest to this fairy tale. It was not much more like the real story, which she knew well, than are the majority of the garbled descriptions given of so-called celebrities in the majority of so-called society journals. But she was not inclined to stand forth and do battle for the truth on behalf of Guy St.

Austle. And this passive spirit was not the result of indifference. It arose from the profound conviction she had that she knew him better than anyone else in the world did. So what matter what others said or thought of him?

An hour later she was buried in the depths of a big, old-fashioned leather chair, that was not beautiful to the eye, but wonderfully soothing to the body. On her right the trim little garden that runs down to the banks of the brawling, merrily cascading West Lyn was visible through the Gothic window, and waves of perfume were being wafted in upon her from its brilliant beds of bloom. Unconsciously the beauty and sweetness of the flowers worked with a softening, relaxing influence upon her mental system. She was permitting herself to delight in reading that story wherein the author's earnest, passionate love for herself revealed itself in every page.

The title "I Have Lived" had not prepared her for what she was reading. It had rather led her to anticipate that it would be a history or, rather, a series of reminiscences of the bolder, more adventurous, and physically manly side of his career. She was not prepared to read, as she was reading now, that he had only begun to live according to his own acceptation of the word on the day he knew her first, and that he had lived on the thought of her and on the hope of her ever since.

She put the open book down on the table, and bent her head down till her lips were lightly laid on the passage that had told her the truth. "Adam might as easily have sought a mate among the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, or the fishes of the sea after having seen his Eve as I might give look, word, or thought of love to any other woman after the one brief glimpse I have had of her below the surface. And though I may never see her again I shall be solitary in the flesh only, for her mind, her soul, her heart will be *mine* forever."

So Guy St. Austle made his hero speak and feel after a two years' separation from the woman who had taught him that to live without the love she could give him would be no life at all. She kissed the printed words, then lifted her head quickly, laughing and blushing at the folly of it, though there had been no one there to witness the action.

"I want a tonic, I think; I am getting weak in my old age," she said to herself; "and the best tonic I can have is the remembrance that I heard him say once that he would tear his heart out of his body rather than let it go into the keeping of a woman who had been either a loving or an unloving wife. He has forgotten that sentiment, I think; but *I* must not forget that he uttered it once and would feel it again if I let him follow his impulse and conquer me now."

She moved about the little room catching glimpses of herself now and again in the square, paper-frilled glass over the mantelpiece. And as she did so she caught a reflection of her head held higher, and of a light of pride and something else in her darkly fringed eyes.

"He went nearly mad for beauty once, they say," she thought, and her chest heaved passionately as she added with sweet triumph and gratitude mingled, "but that was the desire of the moth for the candle. What he feels for me is—well, what I feel for him, I suppose, and that is that there is no one above him and no one beyond him for me. But I have been a wife! Whether I was an affectionate or an unloving one makes no difference to the veto his principles have put upon his love."

When she took up his book again she felt that she knew beforehand what every page would bring forth and how it would end.

"If it is as I think, then I shall know that he has not given me up, and shall be forearmed to fight for him against himself," she said. It did end as she knew it

would, and for an hour after she had read the last line she could not force her hand to relinquish its loving hold upon the book.

As for her thoughts, while her clinging fingers were caressing the words that had come straight from his heart to hers, they were of the mixed sweet and bitter order which are apt to fill the mind of a woman very much and hopelessly in love, whether she may be only twenty or an "old thing of thirty-five," as twenty would probably describe Mrs. Poynter. She thought how brave and steadfast he was to have held on to such a forlorn hope as finding and winning her all these years. She also thought how glad—how gratefully glad she was that in all respects she had grown worthier of that faithful love of his. She tried to feel humbly grateful, but the effort to attain humility was beyond her. Her heart swelled with pride as she reflected that this man, who was as wax in her hands, was no mere commonplace, more or less gallant and gay gentleman, whose ways had been made so easy for him by the world that in all things he regarded the fulfillment of his heart's desire as merely his due. Here was a man whose ways had been rough-hewn from the moment he had reached manhood and become a responsibility to himself. And in every way, in all things, he had vindicated his manhood and justified the judgment of Nature and Providence in thrusting that responsibility upon him. "He may have erred, he may have gone astray, but never meanly or dishonorably. O Guy! thank God that I am loved by you! though for your own sake you must never know that I repay that love a hundredfold. I must never forget that I have been a wife, though you would forget it for a time."

Toward evening, having nearly learnt his story by heart, and finding that certain phrases which had caught her taste were constantly rising to her lips, she came to the conclusion that its presence in her room was decidedly injurious

to her composure. So putting on her hat she took his eloquently silent ambassador under her arm and went down to the Cliff Railway, intending to return "I Have Lived" to the library at Lynton on the hill. But before she could reach the car it began its gliding ascent, and being restless she decided not to wait for the next journey up, but to go instead and saunter through Glen Lyn to its crowning glory, the Seven Falls.

The Lyndale Hotel is close to the entrance of Glen Lyn, as everyone knows who visits Lynmouth, but no one temporarily sojourning in the place can be expected to know where other sojourners are staying, or if they know they cannot be expected to remember. Guy St. Austle happened to be staying at the Lyndale, and the close proximity of its entrance gate made Glen Lyn seem the most appropriate place for an after dinner stroll and pipe. Mrs. Poynter had not passed through the gate ten minutes before Guy was through it also, and she felt before she saw or heard him that he was on her track.

He did not address her by name or offer any of the conventional greetings when he came abreast of her. He only said :

"You spoilt my sketching this morning. Why were you so unlike your old self ?"

"Unlike my younger self, you mean."

"Unlike the Mabel Poynter who first taught me to know what a real man's real life should be. I had been existing in the shade ! I had been dancing with shadows until I met you, and you know it !"

"Since you met me have you *lived ?*" And for the life of her she could not repress the triumphant note of joy—of more than joy—which rose up and rang through her words.

"Then you *have* read my story ?"

She bent her head in assent.

"Mabel! I wanted to ask if you had read it this morning, but you made me feel such an unwelcome intruder here that I dared not ask."

"I am glad you didn't; I should have had to say 'No' then. I have read it to-day for the first time—read it since I parted from you in Lynton this morning."

"And you are—you think——" He paused, for she had not been able to veil her eyes, and he had read something of the feeling which she had for him in that momentary glance. "Forgive me," he said; "forgive me for having made you my theme, the motive power on which all that's decently good in any sense in the book turns."

"Forgive you! for what?"

"For having disregarded the obvious desire you have to get away from and obliterate me——"

"After reading 'I Have Lived' I should be the proudest woman in the world to-day—if you had not made me that already," she said softly. "You have shown me that our friendship has not made a deeper impression upon me than it has upon you; you have made me feel that I was not wrong in thinking of you as I do, as of the *one* man in the world on whom I may have most absolute trust and reliance."

They had reached the little bridge under the falls now, and were sitting down on a mossy bowlder. It seemed that there was nothing to come between them! a few words and the mists might all have been cleared away. He had forgotten that he had once said he would never link his lot with a woman who had been either an affectionate or an unloving wife to any other man. On this evening by the falls of Glen Lyn he might have taught her to forget them, too. But he made no attempt to do so, having wiped them clean off the slate of his memory. All he remembered, all he thought of now was that he had loved this baffling woman for a long time, and longed for her

constant companionship, which made him feel better, brighter, braver, and more at rest than he had ever felt before he knew her.

"Trust me, and rely upon me in the way I prayed you to do two years ago!" he was saying, when there came the sound of hurrying footsteps over dry, parched grass, and the next moment a man—Guy's counterpart—with a huge brindled bulldog at his heels made his way across the river, over the rocks, and joined them.

"Given you a surprise, old man," he began, heartily clapping Guy on the shoulder; then doffing his cap to Mrs. Poynter he apologized for an unreasonable intrusion at an untimely hour.

"The fact is I have tracked Guy from Ilfracombe through the visitors' books, and I haven't seen him for twelve months," he explained, and the lady rose at once, shaking the dew from her delicately laced skirts, and looking up at the sky, which is always ready to betoken rain in Devonshire.

"The interruption is an agreeable one as far as I am concerned. Your brother and I very rarely meet, Sir Walter, and when we do there is one vexed question which we never can settle. We had just raised it when you came."

"Put the matter before me and I'll settle it—as Guy wishes," he said boldly.

"The matter has been before you since the beginning of time," she said, giving a hand impartially to each man over river-encircled rocks. "It is only this—must the woman *always* be the weaker vessel, to be alternately vindicated and condemned?"

"*You're* not going in for politics or county councils, or any other freedwoman's rights, are you?" Sir Walter asked.

As she faced him closely she thought, "The twin shells are alike, but the kernels have a distinct flavor."

"The only 'woman's right' I go in for is the right to help a man to do his best to be true to himself, just as a man comrade would help him," she said.

Then she gathered her delicately laced skirts around her —she had changed from the well tailor-made costume of the morning into something flimsier, but distinctly more graceful, in honor of herself—and stepped along the river stones on the downward path toward Lynmouth.

"Engaged to her?" Walter hurriedly whispered to his twin-brother, and Guy made no verbal reply, merely wagged his head angrily.

"Free, then! and, by Jove! something worth going into fetters for. Guy, she's the most fascinating woman I ever saw in my life."

CHAPTER III.

SIR WALTER.

THAT rumor which had crept into print some years before these days at Lynmouth, relative to Sir Walter St. Austle's approaching marriage, had been absolutely unfounded. At the same time it must be confessed that he had not been altogether innocent of having set it afloat, the truth being that without Guy's knowledge or consent he had dealt a blow for Guy's freedom by leading Miss Laura Davis to suppose that Guy was no longer worth the chains he had suffered her to put upon him now that his heirship was imperiled.

His was a livelier, lighter, more changeable nature than Guy's. Perhaps circumstances had more to do with the difference between the twin-brothers than inherent qualities. All things had gone smoothly alike with both the boys until their father died. From that day, however, most things had gone roughly, very roughly, with Guy for a

between them, all of whic
was the stronger in many ways
so large as Walter's well-opene
steadier and more penetrating.
as Walter's when they were boys
tropical suns had changed it fro
black. It was thicker, stronger l
ered Walter's head. Both the m
ors of firm, well-cut mouths, an
chin carried out the expression of
though nicely molded, lacked decis
neck at the back of his head was w
clean cut and muscular, without a
sensuality. Walter's eyes roved
admiration in them, after every p
sight of, no matter what her age
himself proudly aloof from the
eyes to express any feeling that he
word.

As in their faces so in their fi
tive traits which revealed them

better tempered fellow of the two" by superficial observers. Mabel Poynter was not a superficial observer, and was disposed to think the best that could be thought of Guy's twin-brother. Nevertheless, on this first day of their meeting, against her will, she was obliged to admit to herself that she did not like Sir Walter St. Austle.

When they came out from the Glen Lyn grounds the men, as a matter of course, escorted her to the door of her lodgings in Gothic Cottage, and here Guy prepared to detach himself from the chain which her mere presence flung around him, but Sir Walter, whose eyes were much fascinated and fixed upon her, interposed :

"The night is too good to waste in the house—the sea will be looking ripping under the moon. There's a beach, or an esplanade of some sort, isn't there? Come and take a few turns on it, Mrs. Poynter?"

She assented at once, walking on between them and talking to them impartially in the frankest way possible. She saw that there was something more than pleasure in Guy's face at this slight concession which she was making to his unexpressed wishes, and she took herself to task for having relaxed that rule which she had appointed herself to observe.

"If he would only be content with my friendship, my true, loyal, hearty comradeship, this sort of thing might go on, but as it is he won't take half a loaf, and I won't give him the whole one to his hurt."

No, and she wouldn't have liked it if he had been contented to take the half loaf. His love was the dearest, sweetest, proudest thing life had ever put within her reach, and if he had been contented to give her friendship now instead of it she would have died of the wound the change would give her.

At the same time she could not help fighting against him and herself for what she believed to be his good, and the stanchness of his principles.

They sat down on the seat by the Rhenish tower, and two of them would have been pleased enough to let golden silence obtain, for they were together! close together! Her cloak brushed his coat sleeve, and the brim of her broad-leaved hat brushed his shoulder. He longed to take her little ungloved hand as it laid upon her lap, its fingers twisting about a bit of purple heather unceasingly. But he was not a man who ever took the faintest shadow of a familiarity with a woman. If she had looked at him, and moved her hand the eighth of an inch toward his, he would have known that he would not offend by taking that precious little hand in his own, and pressing some of the feelings of his heart into it. But she did not look at him, nor did she move her hand the eighth of an inch toward his. So he sat still, seeming to look at the sea, while in reality not a single change of expression flitted over the face that was so dear to him without his taking keen and ample note of it.

Silence held no charm for Sir Walter. He was in high, almost excited spirits, for he had not seen Guy for several months, and the one thing in which the twin-brothers were precisely similar was the unswerving, intense, and absolute devotion each had for the other.

To be with Guy—and a charming woman who knew when to speak and when to be quiet—by the sea under a bright moon on a hot night would have been sufficient of itself to raise Sir Walter's spirits to an exuberant pitch. But in addition to this he had dined, and dined well, at the Valley of Rocks Hotel, and though he had not taken too much wine he had taken a good deal. He was full of a new project, too, and a man is generally in ecstatic spirits when he is nourishing and cherishing the infancy of a scheme by which he is bound to win—or lose—an enormous amount of money. At this time, whenever he was not thinking how glad he was to be with old Guy again, and to have a

chance of "chumming up" with Mrs. Poynter, he was thinking of his new racing establishment, of a couple of two-year-olds, who would pull him in a princely fortune if they didn't happen to be poisoned before they could run for the Blue Ribbon, and of The Knight and The Knave, two stallions that he had recovered from America at a cost which he hardly liked to count yet.

"I wish you could see them," he said, speaking of the colts, and addressing Mrs. Poynter; "there's a bit of the Godolphin strain in them; they've those large, soft, prominent eyes that you only see in horses with a bit of Arab blood in them. Their pasterns are as delicate as your wrist."

He caught hold of Mrs. Poynter's hand as he spoke, and held it up for a moment in the moonlight, and during that moment Cainish sensations pervaded Guy's breast.

Mabel took back her hand as if it had been a bit of ice conveniently near to illustrate Sir Walter's meaning; for one moment she caught her lip in and bit it hard. How could any other man than Guy dare to take her hand in his in that way without her permit? She knew that Guy would not have done it if even a dog had been an onlooker. For Sir Walter to have done it before another man, before Guy, shocked her, and would have angered her if he had not been Guy's brother.

"Let us walk about," she said, rising up and drawing the folds of her red cloak closely about her. It was a gracefully cut garment, high on the shoulders as the fashion of the day is, richly lined with wadded silk, and trimmed with gray astrakhan. One hand, the hand that twiddled the bit of heather, not the one that Sir Walter had dared to touch, crept out and held the folds of this cloak over her breast.

"You make a lovely picture, you and Guy," Sir Walter said, suddenly standing apart and looking at them approvingly.

She made an impatient motion of her head; it was so slight that only Guy saw and understood it. Then she remembered that he was Guy's brother, and said:

"Tell me more about your horses; I am very fond of horses, they understand one so well, and never misunderstand one. What are these two-year-olds called that are to bring such fame and fortune on the turf to the St. Austles?"

"They may come to grief; I told you I wasn't boastful about them," Sir Walter answered reproachfully.

"I am sure you wouldn't be boastful about anything," she said; "you are too much like"— she hesitated for half a second, and then said—"your brother ever to be boastful; but you are very sanguine."

"So would you be sanguine if you owned these two-year-olds, and as for Guy's not being 'boastful,' I think he must be a bloodless sort of chap if he doesn't let out a bit of his elation at having kept your friendship for the last four years——"

"You have not told us what you've called the two-year-olds," Guy interrupted impatiently. That his brother should dare to offer broad flatteries to such a woman as Mrs. Poynter annoyed and distressed him, the more so that he (Guy) was made the cause for the commission of the offense.

"Performer and Promise of May; they're both entered for the Two Thousand next May. Performer will make the running for the Promise. Will you back my colors, Mrs. Poynter?"

"The Promise ought to make the running for the Performer if there's anything in a name," she replied, and then it was explained to her that "the Performer is the sweetest tempered horse that was ever foaled, and absolutely trustworthy. The Promise of May, like many another fair beauty, is capricious and apt to lose her temper over trifles.

But the little chap who's to ride her knows her right through, and never puts her out by any chance. My trainer says that the sympathy between the boy and the filly is so strong that she'll always want what her jockey wants, and rather break her heart than not do what he wants her to do. He'll certainly want to win the Two Thousand, for if he does his fortune's made, and the Promise will do all she knows to please him, so I think I'm pretty safe, and you may lay on her freely."

"What are your racing colors?"

"Black and green."

"They don't sound pretty."

"But they are, they're so awfully neat. It's not a vivid bright green, but a soft grayish green. You must see her run for the Derby, too."

"Perhaps I shall not be in England by that time." She glanced hastily at Guy as she said this, and saw a sudden quiver pass over his mouth. "Poor fellow! I wish he could realize that it is only for his sake that I am making him temporarily unhappy," she thought; and pity moved her to add, "It is equally probable, though, that I may be settled down at the time in my little Kensington house. I am a very uncertain woman as far as my movements; I have no ties and very few friends, though I have hundreds of acquaintances. Consequently I go and come as the humor takes me."

"Dull work traveling alone, isn't it?"

"No, I take all my interests with me, you see; that is one good outcome of my isolated position."

"It can't be a case with you of 'I care for nobody, no, not I, and nobody cares for me'?"

"Indeed you are right, Sir Walter. I am not such a forlorn creature as I should be if I could apply those lines to my own case. I care for some people—a few—very much."

"And everyone who meets you must care for you!" Sir Walter rushed his words out tumultuously, and then felt ashamed of having paid her such a crude compliment. "As we are all here together you must honor Guy and myself by letting us disturb your solitude sometimes. The great thing in these places is to get away from them as much as we can. Let us make an excursion to Porlock to-morrow? I did my guidebook all the way from Ilfracombe, and it fired me with the idea of seeing the country between here and Porlock without delay."

"We can go by coach to Porlock from Lynton," Mrs. Poynter said, and Guy's heart bounded; she was assenting to a proposition that would keep him in her company the whole of the next day.

"No, no; we won't go by coach," Sir Walter said eagerly; "we'll rig up a dogcart tandem, and I'll drive you and Guy over."

"You can't get even a couple of crocks that will go together tandem in this place, Walter," Guy put in hurriedly.

"Then I'll wire to Barnstaple for a dogcart tandem to be sent over here to-morrow, and we'll defer the excursion to Porlock till the day after," Sir Walter replied with the buoyant air of one who is accustomed to have his own way in all matters, both great and small.

"I hope you won't trust yourself behind a tandem on that Porlock road. For a good distance you drive along the edge of a sheer cliff, that goes right down into the sea, with nothing between you and destruction but a railing about a foot and a half high," Guy said, addressing Mrs. Poynter.

"She would have to go on the top of a coach along that same road if she doesn't go with me," Walter put in. "Come, Mrs. Poynter, I'm sure you're plucky, and I never knew Guy shirk anything in the way of danger before. We St. Austles never do come to grief where horses are

concerned. Surely you'd as soon trust me as you would a stage coachman."

"I am not shirking anything for myself; I'll go with you, Walter, readily enough, but, for God's sake, don't persuade Mrs. Poynter——"

"I'm persuaded already," she interrupted. If *he* went she was ready to face the danger, for if anything happened to him what good would her own life be to her?

"Brava! well done. That's settled, then. I wire for the tandem—the smartest Barnstaple can turn out—to be sent over to-morrow, and the day after we'll negotiate the road between here and Barnstaple. Now what shall we do to-morrow? Go to the Doone Valley and stir up the red deer and look for traces of John Ridd and his Lorna?"

"How restless you are," she laughed. "Now I should suggest that in view of the Porlock drive the day after I had better take to-morrow quietly by the sea with a book, and you two gentlemen had better fish up to Watersmeet. You want to do the right thing by Lynmouth on the occasion of your first visit to it, I am sure, Sir Walter, and it is one of the *rightest* things to do to fish up the East Lyn."

"Why shouldn't you take your book up to Watersmeet, and encourage us when you see our energies flagging?" Sir Walter asked boldly. "You said just now that you had no one to consider but yourself, and were rather mournful about it. Now just consider us to-morrow, and put the finishing touch to our enjoyment of fly-fishing and Watersmeet by going up with us."

"Then you must let me be your hostess; you must lunch with me at the Swiss cottage. On that condition, that I may be of some use to a couple of zealous and hungry fly-fishermen, I will give up my restful hours by the sea and go up to Watersmeet to-morrow."

"I shouldn't have dared to ask you," Guy took an opportunity of muttering while his brother was momentarily

engrossed by a vision he had just caught of a white-frocked beautiful woman coming slowly toward them: "Laura; by Jove! will she spot Guy, I wonder?" he thought.

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER ELECTRIC LIGHT.

DEVONSHIRE happened to be a favorite haunt of the British tripper during the months of that summer which has already been described as faultless. A picturesque journalist, who had spent a pleasant day or two between Porlock and Ilfracombe, had run up the region in a glowing article which made everyone who read the *Universal Circulator* long to be under the cliffs by the sea at Lynmouth or on the edge of them at Lynton. "Purple Heath and Precipitous Pleasures" was the title of his charming descriptive sketch, and forthwith thousands of the millions among whom the *U. C.* circulated pined to be under and on the edge of these heath-crowned cliffs, and hundreds packed up their traveling trunks and gratified their pining.

Among those who did this was Mr. Davis, the great varnish merchant of Old Broad Street and Bow (where the manufactory is). He was the head of the house now, the husband of a wife, the father of several children, and, to his chagrin, the sole protector of his beautiful sister Laura.

For lovely Laura had failed to fulfill what some people hold to be woman's highest mission in this world. She had had many lovers, she had been the placid recipient of many fairly good offers of marriage, but—there had always been a "but" about the men who proposed to her.

> The plain spoke lad was *far* too rough,
> The rich young man was not rich enough;
> And one was too poor, and one too tall,
> And one just an inch too short for

Miss Laura Davis.

So she was still hanging on the virginal bough, a ripe, a very ripe fruit, at which many a man had pecked since the day she released Guy St. Austle, but which no one had been able to pluck yet.

She was the beautiful vision in a white frock of whom Sir Walter caught sight as she advanced toward them, the redeeming feature of an otherwise extremely commonplace and unattractive family party. As often happens in the case of brothers of extremely good-looking girls, Mr. Robert Davis was unprepossessing in appearance to a marked degree. He was large and fair, like Laura, but in figure he was flabbily fat, and in complexion ruddier than the cherry. His bigness gave one an impression of strength or power, and though he was a keen, energetic man of business, one forgot his face and such expression as it held the moment one lost sight of it.

His wife supplemented him well. Her money had helped greatly to set him on his legs in the City when he married her, and he never forgot this fact, and, more extraordinary still, he never omitted an opportunity of showing her that he held her timely aid in most grateful remembrance. If he was ever guilty of an extravagant act he committed it for the sake of giving her some pleasure or present. He would have had exactly the same amount of regard and the same feeling of gratitude toward any other woman whose money had helped him at the crisis of his life. But this one happened to have been in the way with her wealth and her willingness to marry him, and he repaid her to the best of his ability.

He had assured her when they married that his sister Laura would not be a burden upon them long.

"There was at least a dozen fellows after her, and any one of them would be a good match, so she's sure to settle soon. Till she does you won't find her a nuisance, Anna; she's the best tempered girl in the world, and you can make her useful in the house."

"Making her useful in the house means giving her authority in the house, and *that* I don't mean anyone but myself to have, Robert," she said quietly, and there that matter ended. But though Laura had no authority in the house she stayed in it for what Mr. Robert Davis thought an unconscionably long time, owing to that fastidiousness of hers which found something wanting in all the men who sought her with matrimonial intentions.

It was hard upon Laura that her fastidiousness should have stood in the way of her comfortable settlement in a home of her own, for she was regarded as very much in the way in the home of her brother. There was no active animosity shown to her by Mrs. Robert Davis. In fact, the latter constantly addressed her as "dear," and invariably pointedly called attention to any little useful act which Laura might now and then perform in the house. But the way in which she called attention to them showed the fact up strongly that Laura's acts of usefulness were exceptional things. It was astonishing, too, how often the room which Laura occupied would have come in handy for the accommodation of some person or other whom Robert especially desired to accommodate. When the annual summer outings were discussed, if Laura unadvisedly expressed a slight preference for one place over another, that place was sure to be the one that disagreed more than any other spot on earth with Mrs. Robert Davis. These were slight crosses taken separately, perhaps, but taken collectively and borne continually they would have been exasperating beyond endurance to a less sweet-tempered, thick-skinned, and unsensitive nature than Laura's. As it was, she bore innuendoes and slights with a cheerful indifference that sometimes made Mrs. Robert Davis think that she would leave off aiming them at her pretty sister-in-law any longer. But the next day she would forget this resolution, and another surreptitious shot would be fired into the hand-

some iron-clad, apparently not at all to its discomfiture.

But all the while, under this affably callous demeanor, Laura was thoroughly preceptive and calmly resentful of the intangible affronts that were perpetually being put upon her. They did not sting and hurt her much, but they annoyed her at times, and made her less graciously sweet in manner, and therefore less prettily attractive in person, than she always desired to be. She had the sustaining consciousness that she could at any time put herself beyond the reach of the annoyance by marrying one of the least objectionable of the men who were ready to marry her. But this was an extreme measure, the consequences of which would environ her for life. Therefore she deferred taking it, and so she was a perfectly unfettered and heart-whole Laura Davis who came smiling up to the group composed of Mrs. Poynter and the twin-brothers St. Austle that night on the little Lynmouth esplanade.

The two parties stopped simultaneously as they recognized each other, for both the St. Austles knew Mr. Davis, and though Mrs. Poynter was a stranger to the Davis family, she felt that it would be doing an ungracious thing to walk on alone. She was a woman who never did an ungracious thing of *malice prepense*, and she was too true a gentlewoman to do one inadvertently. So now she stood by with a little look of interest on her face that Guy thought wonderfully fascinating, while the old acquaintances greeted one another.

Laura never suspected the little ruse which Sir Walter had practiced upon her years ago, and so greeted him now with the unfeigned cordial pleasure which she had always felt in the society of Guy's handsome rich brother. She was very glad to see Guy again, still it seemed more in the proper order of things that Guy should improve the occasion conversationally with Robert and his wife, and that she

(Laura) should show Sir Walter that she felt kindly toward him still, though he was no longer her future brother-in-law. The pretty woman hovering so unaggressively in the background did not give her a moment's uneasiness. She presumed it was Lady St. Austle, and began to wonder "if there were any children."

"How odd it is to meet *here*," she said, drawing her snow-white feather boa closer round her throat and lovely chin; "it's quite like a story-book meeting, and shows that fact *is* stranger than fiction, after all!"

"Don't see the oddness of it myself; if one meets someone else it must be *somewhere*, you know! Why not here as well as in the Row, or equatorial Africa, or under the Pyramids, or at Margate, or——"

"Don't, *don't* suggest such a horrible trysting place as Margate," Laura interrupted, sending a well conceived and executed shiver through her pretty frame. "Who ever goes there? I'm sure you never did?"

"On the contrary, I know and love my Margate well. Before I allow you to disparage it you must prove to me that you know it better than I do."

"You always did talk nonsense," she replied with gentle vivacity. Then she made one step nearer to him and whispered:

"Won't you introduce me to Lady St. Austle?"

There would have been an embarrassing pause for a moment had Sir Walter been a shade less self-possessed than he was. He made no attempt to explain, he merely took Mrs. Poynter into the conversation, and made her understand the situation by saying:

"Mrs. Poynter, let me introduce Miss Davis to you—an old acquaintance of mine and Guy's."

The ladies bowed, and Mrs. Poynter held out her hand. For half a second Laura hesitated to take it, then, reflecting that Mrs. Poynter "might be mashed on Sir Walter

just as reasonably as on Guy," she took the extended hand dubiously.

"We were arranging an excursion for to-morrow when we met you," Sir Walter went on, addressing everybody in his vivaciously casual way. "Watersmeet—or the Valley of Rocks——"

"I have seen them both," Mrs. Davis cut in shrilly; "it's so kind of you wanting to include *us* in your party, Sir Walter, but I do like fresh scenes, and having been to Watersmeet and the Valley of Rocks only a day or two ago, I should prefer a change."

"Do wait till you're invited before you refuse to go," her husband mumbled to her reprovingly in an undertone, which Sir Walter considerately drowned by loudly proclaiming that for "all of them to go to Barnstaple next day would be the proper thing to do."

"We can get a four-in-hand, I know, in Lynton—a char-a-bancs or wagonette will do for us. I'll drive you, if you'll confidingly trust yourself to me, Mrs. Davis? And," here he turned to Mrs. Poynter, "we can pick out our tandem ourselves, instead of relying on the livery stable-man's judgment, d'ye see? So we distinctly score by going to Barnstaple to-morrow. The Valley of Rocks and Watersmeet must wait."

She glanced instinctively at Guy before she replied. He was looking at her with an air of pleasurably anxious expectancy. "Perhaps he would like to make up this party for this very pretty woman," she thought, and though there was a tightening of her heartstrings at the bare idea, she said cordially:

"Each plan of yours seems better than the last, Sir Walter."

A rumor had reached her through some friendly female channel that Guy had at one time—before he knew her—got himself into an entanglement with a young lady whom

his friends did not like him to marry. There had not been a shadow of discreditableness in the rumor, as far as he was concerned. Discredit very rarely does attach to a man who breaks off a matrimonial engagement, for it is the women who give the verdict, and they invariably find extenuating circumstances in the case of a man who perjures himself and breaks a promise to one of their own sex. They say, "She was not suited to him, and when he found that out, poor fellow! what was there for him to do but to break it off before the irrevocable words were spoken that would have chained them together for life?" Or, "Well! poor girl, I pity almost as much as I *despise* her; but what will you have when a girl shows a man that she is ready to jump down his throat? He was impulsive, poor fellow! but *she* ought to have known better. He has broken it off in the most honorable way. His income and prospects do not justify him in marrying, he says, and she ought to be grateful to him for leaving her free." If it is suggested to one of these tolerantly prudent ones that the man, being neither a congenital idiot nor an habitual drunkard, must have known at the time of his proposal to the unreasonably aggrieved girl what his present means and future prospects were, the answer is ready: "Oh! I don't say that he is entirely free from blame. But if she had any sense at all she must have seen that he proposed more from a sense of duty than anything else. The truth is the girls of the present day are too ready to jump at any offer; they don't stay to consider whether it is made in earnest or not."

These and a hundred similar speeches had been made by the female friends of both parties, when it had become known that Guy St. Austle's engagement with Laura Davis had come to an end. But when Mabel Poynter had heard of it she did not indorse one of these sentiments, either verbally or in thought; and this night, when she saw Laura for the first time, she felt that it must have been terribly

hard for Guy to have lost the right to call such a beauty his own.

"She seems very sweet and tractable, too," Mrs. Poynter thought as she watched the lovely aunt, forbearingly and without remonstrating, submit to being lugged about, and interrupted every few seconds, by a pushing and aggressive little nephew of four. Then a thrill of pleasure passed through the matured woman's frame. "He did not know me when he fell in love with Miss Davis, nor when he fell out of love with her, either. I have nothing with which to reproach either him or myself," she thought.

They had left the little esplanade, with its carefully preserved Rhenish tower, behind them, and were sauntering up the village street, through which the river leaps and gurgles. Mrs. Davis was explaining that they had only come down to Lynmouth for the evening. The Valley of Rocks Hotel, at Lynton, was their headquarters.

"Lynmouth would have been better, as far as getting to the sea quickly is concerned, and of course it's cheaper than Lynton; but Robert and I are not the people to balance expense against health, and I always like a height better than a valley," Mrs. Davis said as they all pulled up for a few moments at the wicket gate which leads into the garden of Gothic Cottage.

The little four-year-old nephew had relinquished his hold on Laura's dress, and, taking advantage of the slight diversion his mother's speech was making, had run in through the garden and open front door to Mrs. Poynter's sitting room. In another moment he reappeared triumphantly, brandishing a heavily framed panel photograph.

"I rooshed in after a cat, and I found *you* man on the table," the child said ingenuously, holding Guy St. Austle's likeness well up to view under the electric light.

CHAPTER V.

THE LYN'S LULLABY.

THERE was a slight sensation in the little group, some being moved to anger and some to mirth, by little Bob Davis' inopportune method of springing his discovery upon them. For the electric light revealed the features of Guy St. Austle, admirably reproduced by that skilled Dublin photographer who has learnt the great art of letting well alone, and not touching up his portraits out of all resemblance to their originals.

Among those who were angry was the child's mother; and the reproofs she administered to her offspring made a wholesome diversion.

"You are very, *very* naughty, Bobby. You have taken what does not belong to you, and that is *stealing*. You shall not have any cream to-night, and you shall have to say another verse of your hymn. I am shocked at you. Speak to him, Robert—make him feel his fault."

"Dear little man! He only brought the picture out to amuse us," Mrs. Poynter interfered. "I think it was very clever of him to see the likeness to Mr. St. Austle in a moment."

"To take away a thing that does not belong to you is *stealing*," Bobby's mother harped on. "I am shocked—*shocked*—that a child of mine should have been guilty of such an act. Won't you reprove him, Robert?"

"He has been reproved enough surely, hasn't he?" Sir Walter put in. Then he hoisted the little boy up on his shoulder and volunteered to be Bobby's horse as far as the Lyndale Hotel, where a carriage was waiting to convey the Davis party up to Lynton.

It was really a very immaterial and unimportant thing in

itself—this incident of Bobby's unearthing and displaying Guy's photograph ; but it had a marked and important effect on the manner of several of the actors in this little drama this night, and influenced them more afterward than would have seemed credible to them.

To Laura Davis it was a revelation. She had gone on for years thinking of Guy St. Austle as a man who had been declined by her for obvious and sensible reasons, but who was still in love with, and "cut up" at losing her. To discover suddenly that he had given a portrait of himself to another woman, and further, that this other woman carried the portrait about with her, was mortifying. She was too sweet-tempered, too lymphatic, and too cautious a woman to make a fuss about the inevitable. But she was too vain and feminine altogether not to desire to resume her empire over his heart now that she saw signs of that heart's wandering into the keeping of another woman.

It never occurred to her that the photograph might have been bought by Mrs. Poynter, and that Guy might be absolutely innocent of the offense of its being in her possession.

Laura was a singularly unobservant woman, and also a singularly ill-read one. She saw things that were right in front of her, and took an interest in the topics that were discussed in her brother's house. Though she had always gone on liking Guy better than any other man who had ever approached her, she had never been inspired to read either his books or his newspaper articles. Though she had heard that he had become what people called a celebrity, it had not flashed upon her that he had a certain market value for photographers. When she went up to town from her home at Norwood her whole time was given to, and her attention engrossed by, millinery and dressmaking cares.

The only shop windows before which she paused, spell-

bound, were those in which exquisite hued silks and satins and a hundred other marvelous textured materials were displayed in billowing folds. Even the subtly simple arrangements of magnificent flowers and ferns in the fashionable florists' windows were powerless to attract and detain her for more than a minute. Her "brother had equally good orchids and every other kind of flower that the florists had," she was wont to say, "but such dress materials were unknown in Norwood." So it was that she had never noticed Guy's photograph among the other lions, great and small, which are on view for public adulation in Regent Street. She longed now to see more of Guy, and to find out, if it were possible, that he had transferred the love he had once offered her to a woman who "must be a good deal older and not nearly as good looking as I am," she thought, and a gentle feeling of vexation stole over her when they came up to the waiting carriage by the Lyndale Hotel and she knew that in a moment or two they must part.

But Fate and Sir Walter favored her. When Mrs. Davis had settled herself in the carriage and surrounded herself with her children, leaving little room for the others, Sir Walter inveighed against the cruelty of letting even the elephantine animal that was between the shafts drag them all up such a hill.

"Guy and I want a bit of a stretch, Miss Davis; if you and your brother will walk up to Lynton perhaps you'll let us walk with you?"

Before Laura could speak Mrs. Davis, who already had visions of Laura insnaring the baronet, settled it.

"By all means walk up, Robert; we really are too large a party for the poor horse. The Valley of Rocks Hotel, driver! I shall only say *au revoir* to you, gentlemen."

She drove off with her little flock, and the others strolled slowly up the steep ascent, Mr. Davis walking ahead with

Sir Walter and the pair who had been lovers bringing up the rear.

He knew she was going to say something about the photograph, and experienced a sensation of grim contempt for himself for shrinking from telling her the truth, which was that he had not given his likeness to Mrs. Poynter. With what pride he would have avowed the fact if he had done so. As it was he feared that Mabel might only have bought it because he was a good deal talked about just now, and not for any sweeter reason.

"It was very good natured of Mrs. Poynter to take Bobby's part. She couldn't have liked his bringing it out; neither of you could have liked it," she began softly.

"Oh! I don't know. I think I was rather pleased at the little chap's smartness. He must have a quick eye to have spotted the likeness at once. How old is he?"

"Four or five," Laura said hastily. She did not mean to waste time in talking about her little nephew. "Has Mrs. Poynter been here long?"

"I don't know."

"Have you been here long?"

"Only a day or two."

"I suppose you knew she was here?"

"Indeed I knew nothing of the kind," Guy replied impatiently. He was beginning to get tired of being catechised. But Laura, as been said, was not gifted with keen perceptions.

"Then you met by chance. How odd!"

"Do you think so? Just turn round and look back at Lynmouth; it seems to be hung with diamonds, doesn't it?"

"You mean the electric light? Yes, very pretty. I can't help thinking it funny that you should have come down here and found by chance a lady who carries a big portrait of you about with her. Or perhaps she is a greater friend of your brother's than she is of yours? Is that the case?"

"No; Walter met her for the first time in his life to-night."

"Really! I thought they must be very intimate, as he was arranging to drive her out in a tandem."

"He's rather an impulsive fellow, and very anxious to give everyone he comes across pleasure. Mrs. Poynter is an old and highly valued friend of mine. She has never seen Porlock, and so Walter asked her to do us the honor of letting us show it to her, but I don't like the tandem business on that road."

"You are going with them, then?"

"I am."

"But he spoke of a dogcart; you'll have to sit behind."

"I don't at all mind taking a back seat in such company," he said laughingly.

"And I prefer a back seat on a coach, I get so giddy if I look down on the horses. When we go to Barnstaple to-morrow will you take care that I have a seat where I can't see the horses going down those dreadful hills?"

"That I will!"

"And—Guy, have you quite forgiven me; will you be as friendly as ever with me again?"

"I have nothing to forgive, you were quite right, and I *am* as friendly as ever with you," he protested earnestly. He had no intention of being re-subjugated by Laura, but he certainly did not wish her to suffer any pangs of remorse on account of her renunciation of him long ago.

"Then will you do me a favor and look after me on the coach to-morrow? I am really dreadfully nervous, and I sha'n't enjoy the scenery or the air or anything if I feel that I have to take care of myself."

"Certainly," he said, but there was no enthusiasm in his tone. Laura was lovely to look at, but he could not go on looking at her for twenty miles, and he felt intuitively that her conversational power had not improved since those

days when her commonplaces had nearly bored him to death.

"Walter will score again as he did at our birth," Guy thought with mixed feelings of humor and annoyance as he pictured Mrs. Poynter on the box seat amusing and interesting his brother all along the road, while Laura poured her platitudes about the steepness of the hills into his ears.

They had reached the hotel by this time, and with brotherly forethought and zeal Mr. Davis would not hear of the two men going back to Lynmouth till they had been hospitably entertained.

"We'll have a game of billiards first," he said, "and then it will be the time for deviled bones and champagne. This sea air ought to make us all hungry."

So the brothers stayed for two or three hours, and Laura lulled all suspicion to rest in Guy's soul of any desire to recapture him. She was so unaffectedly good tempered and unembarrassed, so easily and perfectly friendly, and nothing more, that he began to accuse himself of having underrated her intellect.

"She's a lovely woman, that Laura Davis; after all, Guy, you might have done a great deal worse. Her brother seems to have struck oil with that business of his from what he was telling me."

"*You* wouldn't look at her after a week alone with her, and I wouldn't give myself more than a month to contemplate her continually, even if I were in love with her looks still."

"The other one has——"

"What do you mean by the other one?" Guy interrupted sharply.

"I meant Mrs. Poynter, but I see I made a mistake," Sir Walter laughed out gayly; but Guy answered unsmilingly:

"My dear fellow, when you've seen a little more of Mrs.

Poynter, you will understand that she could never be the 'other' one to any man she liked; she would always be 'the' one!"

Sir Walter whistled for a minute or two, then he said:

"Coincidences strike one as being shaped by the finger of Fate very often, don't they?"

"You mean that it's strange the Davises should have turned up here just now?"

"I might have thought it strange if Mrs. Davis hadn't let out to me that she saw in the last number of *Entre Nous* that 'Mr. Guy St. Austle, the well-known novelist and journalist, proposed spending a month at Lynmouth.'"

"But—Laura didn't know?" Guy questioned anxiously. He wanted to go on thinking well of Laura. The idea that she, who had calm-bloodedly hurled him adrift in the days of his poverty, should now hunt him in the days of his prosperity, was repugnant to him.

"No, she didn't. Mrs. Davis said 'Laura was so sweet tempered and acquiescent that she never inquired into their plans or interfered with them.' So they came without letting Laura know you were here. But you understand! the 'finger of Fate' has nothing at all to do with the thing. I say! that's a jolly good likeness of you that Master Bobby brought forth."

"Capital one; it's not touched up out of all resemblance to me. It's just as I am."

"Mrs. Poynter must value it highly to encumber herself with it while she's knocking about. When did you have it taken? When did you give it to her?"

"Had it taken about six months ago—didn't I send you one? and never gave it to her at all. I'm off to roost now; the ripple of the two Lyns is a rattling good lullaby, you'll find. Awfully glad you've come, old boy, and, if you'll have me, I'll go down with you and have a look at the old place when we're tired of this."

All the thoughts that filtered through Sir Walter St. Austle's brain this night before the ripple of the two Lyns lulled him to sleep need not be chronicled here, but some of them ran something after this fashion:

"There's no doubt about it, a fellow might do a thousand times worse than marry that lovely woman. That brother of hers must be a sharp chap to have made such a splendid investment of the fortune her father left her. Don't see myself what Guy wants a wife with brains for; he has enough and to spare of his own. He'd find her dollars more useful in everyday life than any amount of cleverness or culture; and he won't be able to go on forever writing about love and war. But every man ought to choose his own wife for himself. I know I mean to do it if ever I do marry."

The idea of marriage seemed more possible, not to say harmonious, to him this night than it had ever done before. Perhaps this was due to the soothing influence of the ripple of the two Lyns.

When the rest of the party went on and left Mrs. Poynter to enter her lodgings alone she was conscious of feeling a very solitary woman. On no account whatever would she have allowed Guy St. Austle to enter them with her, and try to cheer her up with a chat for an hour or two about those old, dear, dangerous times when each knew, though neither had acknowledged, that they loved one another. But to see him walk off with another woman who had been dear to him once was a distinctly painful experience. It was no use reminding herself that he had got over his brief infatuation for Laura Davis before he had ever met her (Mabel Poynter). The fact remained that some of the love she prized so highly, though she was trying to chill and check it, had been frittered away on someone else. She was a generous as well as a sensible and sympathetic

woman. She made no attempt to depreciate Laura's incontestable good looks; they were as patent to her as they were to the rest of the world who had the privilege of beholding them. Nor did she do what many a brilliantly clever woman makes the mistake of doing sometimes when the fangs of jealousy have her in their grip, namely, disparage Laura's mental endowments and incidentally reveal how inferior these are to the jealous one's own. But as she sat thinking deeply for hours, with her eyes riveted on that likeness of Guy's, which seemed at moments to be vitalized by the lamplight, she did question whether she would be justified in relinquishing Guy to what she felt his fate would be if he married an uncongenial wife.

"But if I save him from such a fate the day would come when he himself would raise John Poynter's ghost; and when he did that not even *my* love would be strong enough to exorcise it and lay it finally to rest," she said, with a sigh, as at last she rose and went up to her bedroom.

The windows were open, one looking into the little garden, full now to overflowing with sweet-scented flowers, the other on to the deserted village street through which the Lyns run. As she leant out to take a last view for the night of the bounding little stream she saw a man standing against the opposite wall. She drew back confused, but happier than she had been a minute previously, for she had recognized, and had been recognized by, Guy St. Austle.

His desire to "go to roost" had been overcome by a stronger craving to catch even a glimpse of the shadow of the woman he loved, and his craving had been more than satisfied, for he had looked straight into the eyes that were the sweetest in all the world to him, and seen that they lightened with pleasure as they fell upon him.

"She is younger, much better looking, above all, she is not tainted in his eyes through ever having been possessed by another man! but his last thoughts to-night will be of

me," Mabel Poynter thought as she laid her head on her pillow, "as mine, God bless him! are of him." And the ripple of the Lyn kindly set itself to these words, and to their music Mabel Poynter fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

LAURA IS REMINISCENT.

UNLIKE the professional coachmen—who when starting from Lynton to Barnstaple invariably suavely inquire of the gentlemen who have booked for the journey if "they wouldn't like to walk up the hill"—Sir Walter refused to start until each member of the party was settled in his or her place on or inside the coach.

They had with them a luncheon basket from the Valley of Rocks Hotel that would have done credit even to Fortnum and Mason, and a couple of smart waiters kept guard over this and the lighter roadside refreshment hamper inside the coach. The horses were good, upstanding, sturdy, broad-legged animals, who knew as much about going up and down hill as any horses in North Devon, and to say that accredits them with vast knowledge of the ups and downs of the road. Sir Walter, as he took his seat in a way that showed he had the knowledge and the power of how to sit on the box, felt the exhilaration which is apt to be a portion of a man who sees four good horses in front of him, and knows that he is able to hit under the bars his near leader without touching the noses or ears of the wheelers. Added to the buoyancy of spirit induced by this conviction there was additional stimulus in the facts that the day was one of those rich ripe ones when the whole atmosphere seems to be surcharged with warmth and color, and that a woman who was as well physically and

mentally endowed as she was dressed was sitting by his side.

His spirits were contagious; at any rate Guy had never heard Mabel laugh so loudly, merrily, and frequently as she did during this drive. He had kept his promise, planted Laura on a back seat, from whence she could see neither the horses nor the hills down which those horses trotted, and planted himself by her side. But nothing seemed likely to grow out of that planting. Laura had not very much more to say for herself than she had in the old days when her chirpy chatterings had made him write himself down an ass for having proposed to her. Consequently silence set in at brief intervals, and Laura began to think she had been unwise in allowing her nerves to take her so far away from the neighborhood of Sir Walter, for his rattling voice and laugh were borne back to them upon the breeze continually.

The mature pair in the middle were perfectly happy in their own way, especially after the first halt was called, when they had done ten miles of the distance, for the horses to be watered and the human beings champagned. During this halt Guy climbed down and made his way to the front, where he had the pleasure of holding Mrs. Poynter's glass while she nibbled a biscuit, and Laura had a brief reversionary interest in Sir Walter's attentions.

"How merry you have been in front. I can't think how you can drive so well while you are talking and laughing so much. What has Mrs. Poynter been saying to amuse you so much?" Laura began in half-affected pique.

"'Pon my word I think I was laughing more at what I said myself than at what Mrs. Poynter said," Sir Walter replied candidly; "my sayings were neither very wise nor very witty, but they did duty for being one or the other. Very small change passes current easily on such a day and

occasion as this. I'm afraid Guy has been neglecting his duty if he hasn't amused *you.*"

"Oh! your brother never was much of a talker, and I'm afraid I shouldn't have amused him or made him laugh even if he had heard half I said, which I'm sure he didn't," Laura rejoined with sweet humility; "I am rather stupid, you know! When—when your brother and I knew each other much better than we do now," she went on with a blush, "I used to try so *hard* to understand all he said that I used to tire myself out, and then I used to make mistakes and get hold of what he called the wrong end of the stick. It must be so nice to be quick like Mrs. Poynter is; I'm sure she is, isn't she? Listen to Guy now!" she added, lapsing under the influence of jealousy into the utterance of the once dearly familiar name; "he is talking fast enough to her."

"Let me get you another glass of champagne," Walter said, wisely evading giving an answer to the gently jealous plaint. "No! Oh, you should; it will be hours before we get any lunch. You're looking after yourself, I hope, Davis? Time's up now; we must be getting along the road. You've taken the worst seat on the coach, Miss Davis. What was Guy thinking about to put you here where you can see nothing?"

"I wanted to sit where I couldn't see either the horses or the hills; it wasn't his fault," Laura explained eagerly; but Sir Walter was out of earshot before she had finished her sentence. She was very lovely to look at, but he couldn't help feeling very glad that his lines were cast on the box seat with Mrs. Poynter by his side instead of in the rear with Laura.

"Poor Guy! he's rather in the dulls back there, I think," he said complacently to Mrs. Poynter presently; "she's awfully pretty and awfully sweet, but she's not exactly the companion I should choose for a wet day in a lone house."

"Is there anyone on earth that you would choose for a companion under such circumstances?" she said quickly; and before he could answer she went on, "I know if I had to endure the wet day in a lone house books would be the only companions I could tolerate—the only ones that would find me tolerable."

"Can you stand solitude?" he asked.

"Much better than I can society. I can people my solitude with memories and thoughts that are far more interesting to me than I find the majority of casual acquaintances."

"What an awful pity it is that such a woman as you should prefer to live alone!" he remarked meditatively.

"I am alone here for my holiday, but—I do not live alone."

She sighed as she spoke, thereby doing away with the momentary impression he had that the companion referred to must be her own child.

"No mother would look so glum about having the companionship of a kid of her own," he thought as he glanced down admiringly at her shapely head and mobile face, and a gentle feeling of satisfaction pervaded his heart. Somehow or other he did not like to think of this woman as the mother of another man's offspring. After all, there were strong points of resemblance in the characters of these twin-brothers.

It went against his own taste that he should feel so much curiosity concerning this woman and her manner of life, still he could not restrain the expression of it.

"Have you thought it necessary to start a sheep dog? Have you been compelled to throw that conventional sop to Mrs. Grundy?"

"Do you mean have I an official companion? Indeed at my staid age a sheep dog, as you call it, would be a very unnecessary evil. My—my late husband's daughter lives

with me; naturally, until she marries, she will share my home."

"She's lucky to have such a charming stepmother. Is she a child, girl, or woman?"

"A woman of twenty-three or four, and a very attractive one."

"Wonder she hasn't married before now!"

Mrs. Poynter's face grew scarlet for an instant, and if he had been looking at her he would have seen her eyes flash. The next instant she had recovered her composure, and was saying calmly:

"It isn't for want of being wooed that she is still unwed, but she is a very uncommon kind of girl."

"Superior woman, eh?"

"No; not at least in the sense in which you are using the word 'superior.' She cares nothing for women's rights or the higher education of women; but, on the other hand, she is far from being feebly feminine. I think most people would find her very interesting—men especially."

"Pretty, eh?"

"Very! pretty and fascinating."

"Do *you* find her very interesting?"

"I have had charge of her since her father died; one is naturally interested in one's charge."

"That means that you don't love her," Sir Walter thought, but he only said aloud:

"At any rate you have interested me in your young lady. What is her name?"

"Ella."

"Has Guy seen her?"

"What makes you ask that?" she said hastily and anxiously, and there was a touch of astonishment in his tone as he replied:

"Only because I wondered what he thought of her."

"He has never seen her," she said with curious con-

straint. Then she added with an effort, "He could only admire her; he would be sure to do that."

"Then you think I should be sure to admire her, too?"

"Not as Guy would—as Guy will if he ever sees her," she said, with a little vexed laugh. "How you have drawn me on to discuss a subject I rarely mention, because it is one to which I am unable to do justice!"

"I'm afraid I've been rather pertinacious, not to say inquisitive. I'll own up handsomely to it, and you'll have to forgive me——"

"How glad I shall be when we sight Barnstaple," she interrupted; "it will suggest something fresh to talk about—before I bore you hopelessly about Miss Poynter."

"I don't think you could bore a man even if you tried," he said admiringly; but he added to himself, "but you would be so jealous of a fellow you loved that you'd half harass yourself into your grave. What's the crux between her and Guy, I wonder? He's got it badly enough, and she seems to think about him pretty much. Here we are at Barnstaple, Mrs. Poynter, and you haven't bored me a bit, far less 'hopelessly,' yet."

"Dear me!" Mrs. Davis' voice was heard saying, "do you know I've been asleep? This beautiful bracing air and lovely scenery has quite overcome me. I don't think I ever enjoyed a drive so much in my life."

"Now, having got to Barnstaple, let us get out of it without a moment's delay and find a place to picnic in," Sir Walter directed, and presently they found themselves on a well-turfed, gently sloping bank under some larches by the river.

"Walter had the luck of it again to-day," Guy St. Austle said to Mrs. Poynter as he engineered her out of earshot of the others; "I heard your voices the whole time. Happy Walter; he had something to say and could say it to you!"

She stooped to pick a piece of meadowsweet, and with her face concealed from him said :

" We started a subject in which he became interested, and about which I am naturally eloquent—my daughter."

" Good Heavens ! your *daughter !* "

" My stepchild I should have said. Yes, Mr. Poynter left his daughter in my charge. I have never mentioned her to you, have I ? "

" Never ! " Guy said briefly. It was annoying to him that there was this other hitherto unsuspected link between the dead man and herself. " You have confided more to Walter in the course of three hours than you have to me in the course of three years," he went on reproachfully.

" Your brother has a very frank way of finding out whatever he wants to know," she laughed, but though she spoke lightly she was conscious of depression. Quick to perceive everything that took place around her, she was especially quick to notice how any and everything affected Guy. He had winced under that first mention of John Poynter's daughter. " Will he wince more when he sees Ella ? or what ? " she thought uneasily, and a little pang shot through her soul at the prospect of Guy's seeing her late husband's daughter. " I don't want Guy to hate anyone belonging to me. I hope he won't hate Ella ! " she said to herself excusingly.

Time did not fly that day at Barnstaple. The wrong people got together and clogged Time's wings. Moreover, even had Guy been able to secure Mrs. Poynter's unadulterated society, as he sought to do, there would still have been little satisfaction in the achievement. For in feeling they had come to a certain dangerous pass about each other, and in seeming they did not dare to approach this point, or rather they did not know how to do it, for " not to dare " was a phrase that did not obtain in the vocabulary of either of them.

Strolling about the beautifully situated, picturesque, and exquisitely clean old town in the golden mellowed light of a perfect summer afternoon, they found themselves on the bridge on which a mob of robbed, cheated, and consequently infuriated farmers once cornered, and thought they had caught, Tom Faggus.

"There must have been a lot of good about that fellow; he had the pluck to put his roan at the parapet with a drop beyond it of forty feet down into the river. It must have been fine sport to see the men he'd left behind him throwing their stones after him and his strawberry roan as they swam to shore."

"I should have wished him so well if I'd seen him do it I believe I'd have thrown myself in the way of the stones rather than that he should be hit, Sir Walter," Mrs. Poynter said, looking at Guy though she addressed his brother.

"Do you admire mere brute courage so much?"

"There must have been something more than mere 'brute courage' about Faggus or his roan mare wouldn't have been so devoted to him. I think the prettiest story I ever read is that of the mare kicking down the stable door, rushing out, and fighting the constables with teeth and hoofs who were taking away her master."

"I fail to see anything pretty in the fiction, and if it was a fact I should heartily regret that the mare's misguided enthusiasm for a villain didn't meet with its just reward. Faggus ought to have been hanged and his mare shot. I am a man of law and order. According to my idea, whoever breaks the one or disturbs the other should be punished for the common weal."

"The man was hanged and the mare was shot!" Mrs. Poynter said thoughtfully. "Poor Winnie! she shared the fate that befalls every living creature that loves someone else better than itself. If she had stayed in her stall and gone on eating her oats philosophically when her

master whistled for her, instead of rushing out and fighting for him, she might have lived to a ripe old age."

"And never been mentioned in song or story as she is now; distinctly the strawberry roan scored by her action. Unselfish devotion that may be extremely detrimental to themselves is what everything feminine ought to be trained to feel and to display."

"You don't mean that surely, do you, Sir Walter?" Laura asked wistfully. She was beginning to think his gayety a more attractive thing than that gravity of Guy's which was apt at times to merge into sternness. But if he meant to demand devotion that might be detrimental to her from the woman he might finally elect to the honored post of Lady St. Austle, then there would be serious drawbacks to the position in Laura's estimation. Not all the infectious gayety of manner in which he was such a proficient could compensate her for "having everlastingly to put herself out of the way for him," she reflected as she smilingly refused Mrs. Poynter's offer to change places with her (Laura) on the homeward drive. But when half that homeward drive was accomplished Laura was admitting to herself that Walter was more congenial to her than Guy. She felt herself more on a par mentally with the man who made jokes which she scarcely grasped, and laughed heartily at them himself, than with Guy, who spoke seriously of things of which she had no conception, with the evident expectation that she would follow him, which she couldn't.

"You don't think your brother *really* meant that he thought everything feminine ought to be trained to show unselfish devotion, whether it may hurt them or not, do you?" she asked at last after a prolonged pause, during which Guy had been condemning his brother as an empty-headed ass for being mirthful and talkative about that well-worn theme—himself.

"Walter often says what he doesn't mean when he wants

to be amusing; he certainly would never exact devotion that might be detrimental to the one who exhibited it from any one man or woman. He's the most unselfish fellow that ever lived," he added warmly, regretting that he had called Walter an empty-headed ass in his thoughts two minutes before.

"He was telling my brother last night that we ought to go on into Cornwall, and asking us all to pay him a visit if we did. But we're such a troop, aren't we? unless Bessie decides to send the children and nurses home or leave them here. He said he should invite Mrs. Poynter too; do you think she will go?"

"Can't possibly say." The thought of showing Mrs. Poynter the old home that was so dear to him was very pleasant to him, though Walter was the master of it, and she would be Walter's guest.

"You would be one of the party, I suppose, wouldn't you, Mr. St. Austle?"

"Yes, I haven't been there for a long time; I'm longing to see the old place again."

"I have the photographs you gave me of the entrance hall and drawing room still. It must be a beautiful place, and such a pretty name too, Trehearne Towers——"

"Trelyn Towers!" corrected Guy.

"Trelyn! Well, that's just as pretty, isn't it?" She was quite approving in her manner.

"Good God! I loved this woman once," thought Guy, "and all the time she was thinking it would be pleasant to be the mistress of the house with a pretty name."

In thinking this he did Laura an injustice. Her interest in the home of his forefathers had been partly feigned to please him in the old days. Her forgetfulness of its proper name was a genuine thing now, when she met and wished to please him again, for she was, as she had a habit of admitting, a very stupid woman, who had little or no memory of anything outside the margin of her daily life.

CHAPTER VII.

A YOUNG AVENGER.

"MAY I come and see you to-morrow—it would be so kind of you to let me?" Laura asked in a sudden access of intensely friendly feeling toward Mrs. Poynter when the party were separating that night.

"Remember we start for our tandem drive to Porlock at half-past ten," Sir Walter put in remindingly.

"Oh! I forgot that plan," Laura said, blushing vividly. She had been brought up in rather a rigid school of surface respectability, and she could hardly conceive the idea that a woman who looked so proper as Mrs. Poynter would take a long drive in the dashing style which surrounds a tandem like an atmosphere, alone with a couple of young men, unless she were engaged to one of them.

Mrs. Poynter frowned thoughtfully, not angrily. She fathomed Laura's meaning at once, and recognized the justice of it. "Even at my age I have no right to do this," she thought. Then she said (and her answer was addressed to the brothers as much as to Laura):

"I had not forgotten it, but I don't think I ever heartily assented to it. I shall ask them to excuse me, and so I shall be able and very glad to receive you to-morrow, Miss Davis."

"But I don't feel a bit like excusing you; I've secured the tandem, and don't mean to be defrauded of the object for which I secured it," Sir Walter put in jestingly, but with real earnestness of purpose. "Come, Guy, speak up; we won't be thrown over by Mrs. Poynter in this way, will we?"

"I like the idea of your pleasing yourself in every way, and I don't like the idea of your being driven tandem along

the edge of a cliff that's only protected by a little railing that is rather an ornamental feature than a protective measure," Guy said quickly, addressing Mrs. Poynter and ignoring Walter's running fire of protesting words. He had gleaned from a glance at Mrs. Poynter that she did not wish to become the object of his brother's marked attentions, and though he felt hopeless about her himself, he liked protecting her from any other man.

"That being settled, I shall look for you to-morrow, Miss Davis——" Mrs. Poynter was beginning, when Mrs. Davis struck in :

"I hope you will all dine with us to-morrow at eight, Mrs. Poynter. The gentlemen will be home by that time from Porlock, and they can paint the lily as much as they like, and try to make you feel sorry for what you will have missed. We none of us know either Porlock or the road to it, so we can't edit their statements about the beauties of either."

This was a speech of unparalleled length and perspicuity from Mrs. Davis ; but she had been inspired by her husband to make it in a brief, emphatic whisper while the argument about Mrs. Poynter's going or not going to Porlock was being carried on. She was very apt at acting on her husband's hints and instructions. She had been the recipient of many of them, and she had found that if acted upon implicitly they always tended to her worldly welfare.

"Half a loaf is better than no bread ; my brother and I accept your invitation with pleasure, Mrs. Davis, but I still feel that *you* have behaved rather badly to us," he added, turning to Mrs. Poynter.

She could afford to smile, as she did, good-temperedly at his disapproval, for it was clear to her that Guy thought she had done right.

Laura Davis arrived at Gothic Cottage the following day looking deliciously crisp and cool in an azure-hued cambric.

She had not been actuated by any particular motive in asking to see more of Mrs. Poynter. She was only conscious of a vague desire to find out if there was anything between the widow, who was older and not nearly as pretty as herself, and either of the two brothers. She was also quite willing to exchange the companionship of her sister-in-law and the children for that of this stranger, who had seen so much more of life in its attractive phases than she herself had. Placid as she was there were times when Laura grew rather tired of the comfortably luxurious dullness of her brother's house. To make a friend of Mrs. Poynter might turn out to be an advantageous thing. "She might like to have a girl to stay with her sometimes in the season; it would be as nice for her as for me," Laura, who knew nothing of the existence of the stepdaughter, thought as she glided down the Cliff Railway and made her way to Gothic Cottage.

She was so early in the field that Mrs. Poynter had not finished either her letters or her breakfast. But there was nothing discomposing about Laura. She was neither aggressive nor apologetic. She made no laborious efforts to explain away or account for her premature presence, but just told the truth and took the offered coffee and toast in a simple, straightforward way that was characteristic of her.

"Getting up early always makes me hungry, and I got up quite early to see the St. Austles start in their tandem. They looked so nice, and so much alike, sitting there side by side. I don't wonder that you wished to go with them. What made you alter your mind?"

There was not the shadow of impertinence in this bold question. Laura had no intention of being intrusively curious, and Mrs. Poynter was neither secretive nor suspicious.

"I was hurried into accepting Sir Walter's invitation by that powerful, carry-all-before-it manner of his. I had repented it at leisure during our drive yesterday, and I was

very much obliged to you for giving me an excuse for getting out of it."

"When I heard you were going with them I thought you must be engaged to one or other of them. One would think that naturally, wouldn't one?" Laura questioned earnestly.

"I am not engaged to either of them, so for their sakes as well as my own I am glad I didn't go with them, as our action would have been so—so *foolishly* misconstrued."

"You would have thought the same thing if you had heard they were going to take *me*."

"I am a much older woman than you are; moreover, my position is different. I am a matron of many years' standing."

Laura nodded her head slowly in assent, and looked thoughtfully at her hostess.

"Still I am glad I didn't go," Mrs. Poynter went on lightly.

"And I am glad too—as you're not engaged to one of them. I shouldn't have liked to hear things said that Robert and Anna would have been sure to say. They are both *very* particular, and they would have blamed the St. Austles just as much as they would you if they had thought they were carrying on with you without being engaged."

"But now the minds of your family and yourself will be set at rest," Mrs. Poynter said, laughing.

They rose as she spoke and Laura's eyes fell upon a long, low table on which were arranged Mrs. Poynter's writing case, several bowls of roses, and two or three photographs, but Guy's was not among the latter she noticed with some satisfaction.

"You don't give Mr. St. Austle's photograph a place of honor on your writing table?"

"I haven't it on my writing table."

"Oh! but who is this?" Laura exclaimed, picking up a

framed miniature on ivory. "What a wonderful face! Is it a fancy picture, or a likeness of anyone you know?"

"It's a likeness of my stepdaughter, Ella Poynter, done by herself."

"Has she flattered herself?"

"You will be able to judge soon. I have heard from her this morning. She wishes to come and join me here."

"How clever she must be to paint anything so beautiful as *that.*"

"I have no doubt you will see some more of her work when she comes down," Mrs. Poynter replied, with a scarcely perceptible shiver. "When it's a labor of love it's exquisite, as in this instance." She pointed to the miniature.

"Has she ever painted you?"

"Yes," Mrs. Poynter replied, laughing again.

"Was that a labor of love? Is it exquisite?" Laura persisted, and Mrs. Poynter seemed to be weary of the subject, for she answered abruptly.

"She painted what she saw in my face, no doubt; but the result is not pleasing."

"I wonder if she would make a good picture of Mr. St. Austle—has she ever painted men?"

"Never from life, that I'm aware of," said Mrs. Poynter, answering the last portion of Laura's speech only. "Now, shall we go and idle away an hour or two by the Glen Lyn Falls? Shall we take books, or rely upon one another for entertainment?"

"I like talking better than reading, but I'll take a book, if you like," Laura agreed amiably. So Guy St. Austle's latest work was put into her hands, and she dived into its pages at intervals through the hours of the morning.

"I wonder who all these people are? Do you think

they're *real?* Do you think he will ever put you or me in a book, Mrs. Poynter? I shouldn't like it at all."

"If he does, you'll never know it; we none of us see ourselves as others see us, you know."

"But other people would know it, and they would be sure to tell me of it; especially if I were put in disagreeably, you know," Laura urged, with more acumen than Mrs. Poynter had given her credit for possessing. Then there was silence for a few minutes. For the one woman it was filled with anxious, half remorseful, half resentful thoughts. For the other, it was filled with vain conjectures as to why Mrs. Poynter and her stepdaughter didn't like one another. "Can it be about Guy, I wonder?" she thought. "Stupid, some women! If a man likes you best, he tells you so; and if he likes someone else better than you, what is the use of worrying about it?" It was a happy philosophy, and Laura not only preached it to herself, but practiced it pretty faithfully.

"I feel as if we had become great friends," Laura said kindly when they were parting that morning. "It will be so nice our all going down to Cornwall together, and when we go home again I shall always feel that I've someone to go to when you're in town."

"My stepdaughter's appearance on the scene will probably alter all my plans. Ella very rarely asks me to do anything for her; when she does I feel bound to do it. She may not wish to go to Trelyn Towers."

"Oh, I hope she will," Laura said fervently. "She might paint us all."

"She might," Mrs. Poynter rejoined dryly.

It made quite a little sensation among them all that night at dinner, this promised visit from Mrs. Poynter's hitherto unknown stepdaughter. Mrs. Poynter had, naturally, not carried the miniature in her pocket, nor did she reply very

eloquently to the inquiries about Ella. But Laura was rapturous in her description of the "sweet little dark face and purple eyes with the curly lashes."

"Aren't you longing to see her?" she inquired of Guy, and he replied carelessly but truthfully, "Not a bit of it."

He had discovered that Mabel did not wish her to come.

Meantime the cause of this excitement was quietly and quickly making her preparations to join the one woman in the world for whom she had as hearty a dislike as she had an unmitigated contempt. She had every reason to think herself well justified in nursing both these feelings. For something had transpired at the time of her father's death which had made her vow girlish vengeance against the woman whom she had never liked as her father's wife. Why this dislike should have intensified from that time Mabel Poynter did not know, for she was ignorant of the existence of the weapons which Ella meant to use against her in the fullness of time, when a good crushing opportunity arose. The girl thought the opportunity had arisen now, and was coming down to Lynmouth with her weapons in her traveling trunk, prepared to use them without compunction.

She sharpened them by recalling the splenetic look, and peevishly suspicious expression and manner, which had so hurt and pained her in her father during the last few months of his life. The girl had adored her father to the end, and had been adored by him in return, till that unwanted Mabel had intervened to make him first selfishly happy, and toward the end selfishly miserable. Ella had resented his happiness with her mother's successor to a certain degree. But this resentment was as nothing to that which she felt when she discovered that the unwanted woman had made her father's last days a torment to him.

"She shall be punished for it!" she had sworn, as she knelt in the room in which her father had died, the day

after the funeral, after having gathered together a bundle of his carelessly kept papers. "I don't know how, or when, or why! but she shall be punished by me."

She was not a dramatic young person by any means, the one who took this task of vengeance upon herself. But she was an unfortunate combination of artistic temperament, meager education, and warm heart. Her one great gift was that of portraiture, and though she often failed in the draughtsmanship of the accessories, she never failed in expression or coloring. She painted what she saw with rare feeling, exquisite delicacy, fidelity, and subtle sympathy. But in painting what she saw she frequently painted what her sitters had not meant her to see.

Perhaps she had done this in the case of her stepmother, as the latter told Laura Davis that, "Ella painted what she saw in my face, but the result is not pleasing."

"She hasn't dared to refuse to have me, though she hates my going there," Miss Poynter said gleefully to herself, as she read the few lines in which Mrs. Pointer agreed to receive her at Lynmouth. She had packed her trunks before she had received the letter, but now she raised the lid of an unstrapped one and laid several penciled and painted studies of a head on the top of everything else.

"I shall ask Mabel Poynter to undo my boxes for me, and the first thing she will see will be these studies of Guy St. Austle, head and face. That will make her shiver, for she'll think it's love of his good looks that has made me take the trouble to make so many sketches of him. I *love* to see her looking vexed and anxious, and not daring all the time to ask me why I do it. Perhaps she'll send him away before I get there. If she does I shall feel sure that *he is the man.* If he *is!* Poor papa—poor darling, shamefully used papa! you will know, wherever you are, that your little daughter has not forgotten you, and loves you dearly still."

Ella carried out her programme to the letter. There was scant courtesy, and no cordiality whatever in the way in which she greeted the woman on whom she had in a measure forced herself. Nevertheless she made that woman useful.

"Come to my room with me, Mrs. Poynter, and help me to undo my boxes," she said, with the slight imperiousness, not to say insolence, which had characterized her manner to Mrs. Poynter ever since her father's death. And when Mabel lifted the cover and saw the various profiles, three-quarter and full faces of Guy St. Austle, that were scattered about, Ella observed scornfully :

"Been at my favorite work, you see! I am never tired of making sketches of that man, for I fancy he and I will have something to say to one another one day."

"That day may be sooner than you think, for 'that man' is staying at Lynmouth now."

"I knew it," Ella said coldly. Her stepmother looked up at her quickly, and Ella thought she read fear in the glance—fear and distrust.

It is so essentially human to see in the face of one whom we suspect the reflection of our suspicion. So-and-so has wronged us, we think, in some way, large or small. Accordingly, when we meet probably unconscious So-and-so, we read confusion or defiance according to what we have decided he is feeling, in his totally expressionless gaze. We look at him with angry embarrassment unintentionally, and as in a looking-glass we see the look repeated on his face. Or we deem him so hopelessly disregardless of the debt he owes us, that we glance at him with careless scorn ; and lo ! "careless scorn," lurks in the pose of his haughtily averted head, and under the lowered lids of his scornfully averted eyes. In fact, when we scowl at the world it scowls back at us promptly. When we doubt it, it doubts us with tenfold force. When we lie in wait to catch it tripping, it has us by the heels in no time. When we loathe and would

shun it, it pays back our loathing with ten per cent. interest, and resigns us without so much as holding a finger out to hold us back. But if we "love," our portion of it, it loves us with regal largeness in return.

CHAPTER VIII.

LAURA "CLINCHES IT!"

"WHY has she come? You say she has never liked you. (There must be something wrong about her, if that's the case.)" This last sentence parenthetically, to himself.

"She has a right to share my home, wherever it may be."

"Honestly, Mrs. Poynter, I must tell you that I don't think your stepdaughter bears any one of our party any particular good will."

"But she knows nothing, absolutely nothing, about any one member of it, with the exception of myself, and I certainly am not conscious of having deserved her ill will. Believe me, Sir Walter, there is nothing but girlish, almost childish petulance, beneath that suppressed manner which irritates you so much. I came in her way and took her place as mistress of her father's house, when it was the height of her childish ambition to fill that place. She felt sore, she has cultivated the soreness, and it's added to by the fact that she is to a great extent dependent on me. I pity poor Ella from the bottom of my heart, but——"

There was a rustle in that portion of the library at Trelyn Towers which was screened off from the rest of the room to make a cozy writing corner for the lady visitors who preferred it to their own rooms, and Ella stepped out into the dumfounded presence of her stepmother and Sir Walter St. Austle.

"Don't waste any pity on me for being dependent on

you, Mrs. Poynter ; I will try to pay all my debts to you in time."

The girl began her speech with a poor, pathetic attempt at dignity, but before she had spoken a dozen words she lapsed into furious facility, an always feeble error. Her clear olive skin glowed with an angry red ; her humid purple eyes deepened into black behind their long, curly lashes ; and her slender, lithe little form quivered with the emotion she longed to portray imposingly.

"Ella !" Mrs. Poynter began in utter astonishment. Then she added impatiently : "Don't talk such folly ! Some people might make the mistake of thinking you meant it."

For once Ella felt cowed and confused. She could not delude herself into fancying that she had either embarrassed or alarmed her stepmother by the childish petulance with which she had thrown down her little glove. But that she had annoyed Mrs. Poynter was evident. Mrs. Poynter, annoyed and not frightened, would be no sport at all. After all, those weapons which were concealed in Ella's writing case would not seriously wound a foe who offered an armor of either indifference or defiance to their poisoned points. But would she remain either indifferent or defiant if Mr. Austle saw them bared to strike her ? No ! Ella, after a week's keen observation of the pair in the delightful unrestraint of a bachelor's country house, thought decidedly not.

Against her sense of right, against her better judgment, even against her instinct of self-preservation, which was as keen in her as it is in most women, Mrs. Poynter had come to Trelyn Towers and had brought Ella with her. Being with Guy daily, hourly almost, in his own old home was dearly pleasant to her at times, and at others desperately painful. The pleasant times were when he was taking her about in the gardens and shrubberies, the stables and

kennels, telling her of the days when he had ridden his first pony by his pretty mother's side; of when and where he had shot his first rabbit, as a tiny boy of seven, and later on, when, as proudly elated chaps of ten, Walter and he had gone out with the hounds with their father, and not merely ridden to the meet with their mother, as in previous years. Listening to him, sympathizing with him, taking a keen interest in all his half suppressed, loving reminiscences of his mother and those boyish days, she forgot herself, and lapsed into such happiness as startled her when she became conscious she was reveling in it. And then she would draw back into her shell of reserve, and cause him to feel that he had made no more way with her than he had that first day at Lynmouth, when Walter came with boisterous, cheerful confidence into their lives.

The painful times were those when Ella's searching eyes were bent on her, with a look that she felt was intended to remind her of something which would be bad to remember. But what that something was, she could not for the life of her imagine. For Ella could not know! Certainly Ella *could* not know anything of the only circumstance in her life which poor Mabel Poynter desired to be buried in oblivion.

There were other moments of perplexity and embarrassment for her, in addition to those just mentioned. Sir Walter had fallen, in his gay, unobservant way, into a habit of treating her in a semi-fraternal manner, that would have been delightfully flattering to her had she dreamed for a moment of relaxing her determination never to marry his brother. But this was a dream she would not allow herself to indulge in. She had no fancy for hearing her hero say, when the first love glamour was over, and the matrimonial chain began to gall ever so slightly, that it had been foreign to his tastes and against his instincts that he had eaten of a fruit which had been plucked by another man.

"And even Guy would be sure to have his moments of impatience and ungenerosity when he got accustomed to me as his wife. All men have them! And all women, too, for that matter. And as his wife I should be bound to listen to the verbal outcome of these moods! It would be too awful to hear him say that he was sorry I had ever belonged to another man! I love him so that I might get to hate him, if he hurt me to that degree. Whereas, now, I shall go on loving him to the end, and he—yes! I feel sure he will go on wishing for me."

This was the line of argument she would take against her impulses, in favor of love and Guy, every night when she got herself into her own room alone. She would strengthen them considerably, now and again, when she had been more than ordinarily heavily tempted during the day. For she was still young enough to feel "the maddened pulses glow," when his hand pressed hers, or his eyes seemed to burn as he held her under their spell. In fact she was very much in love with her fine, handsome, clever lover; very much in love with him, very proud of him, very jealous of him, and, it may be added, very much afraid of ever becoming his wife.

There was a second light romance going on in the house, of which no one seemed to take much heed, though in reality the Davises were desperately alive to it, and desperately desirous that it should culminate in a speedy commonplace marriage, without any preliminary hitches or jars. Mr. Davis had his own sound, businesslike, strong reasons for wishing to see his lovely sister well settled in life soon, and Mrs. Davis understood the wish, without knowing anything of the causes which gave force and volume to it. Sir Walter was very much enamored by this time. The constant sight of such a lovely, good-tempered woman as Laura had brought him to the pass of feeling that everything would look very leaden hued for a time, should he

lose that sight. Moreover, he admitted to himself that "her dollars would come in very handy," for things had gone wrong with his most promising two-year-old thoroughbreds; so wrong that the colt could never be started on any but an insignificant local racecourse, where he would have nothing half as breedy as himself to beat. Further, his famous sire, the Knight, for whom he had paid four figures, had died of heart disease. Altogether things were looking very mournful, both in his breeding and training stables; and though he made no moan about it to those around him, he began to acknowledge that a rich wife would be not only a luxury, but a necessity for him. Laura was rapidly becoming a most charming necessity to him, but, great as the pace was, it was not half fast enough for Mr. Robert Davis.

"I want to see Laura settled, well settled, before another month is over our heads," he would say repeatedly to his wife, who would respond feelingly:

"So do I, I am sure, Robert. *I* should have been so glad to see her settled in a home of her own years ago, but you gave in to all her nonsense, and allowed her to let good chance after good chance slip through her fingers."

"This is the best chance she has ever had, and it mustn't be let slip through her fingers. I think he means straight enough, but he's such a deuce of a time about it. Why don't you drop in on them some morning, when they're spooning away in the billiard-room under the pretense of his teaching her billiards. He'd have to speak out, if you saw any billing and cooing going on."

"Robert, you never asked me to do anything so underhand before in your life," she said, shocked out of her usual acquiescent amiability.

"I never felt so underhand before in my life," he replied irritably. "It's no use bothering you with my business worries, Anna, so don't ask me anything, but just do as I

tell you ; clinch this matter with Sir Walter as soon as you can."

After all the matter was clinched by Laura herself in a very justifiably feminine fashion.

The whole party had gone to a ball one night, that was got up by subscription among any number of the adjacent families to inaugurate the reign of good-fellowship between the "county" and professional townspeople, just before an impending general election. It was held in the rooms of a picturesque hotel—rooms that were normally devoted to the service of bazaar projectors, political orators, amateur theatricals, missionary meetings, and other entertainments of a more or less popular order. But they lent themselves admirably to the requirements of a ball. The whitewashed walls gleamed showily through wreaths of ivy and trophies of flags. The summerhouses in the old world garden that climbed up a steep hill in a series of rough terraces made deliciously cool and sequestered "sitting-out" rooms, and it was in one of these latter that, when the night was well on, Sir Walter St. Austle "spoke out," as Laura afterward described his action to her brother.

There had been quite an easy flow of conversation between them for at least twenty minutes. Silence had always been mildly abhorrent to Laura's essentially sociable nature and chatty disposition. It has been told how, in the days of her engagement to Guy St. Austle, she had always labored under a faint dread of not being able to catch on to his meaning, and therefore of responding in an irrelevant, not to say an imbecile manner. But with Sir Walter she labored under no such demoralizing fear. His remarks were never over her head ; his loquacity never laid her under the obligation of originating a conversation. In short, she was at her most placid ease with him, and her sense of comfort made her a most soothing companion to the excitable, volatile man at her side.

"There goes your brother. Who is it with him?" Laura asked, pointing out a pair who had just stepped out of one of the open windows of the ballroom and were wending their way toward the river that took its tortuous course through the garden. "Mrs. Poynter, I suppose; he generally gets with her when he can, doesn't he?"

"In this instance it's Miss Poynter. Guy's not going to transfer his allegiance from the stepmother to the stepdaughter, I hope, for somehow I don't quite like that little girl."

"She's very nice-looking," Laura said generously; "sometimes her funny little dark face is quite pretty (not nearly as pretty as she has made it in her likeness of herself, though), and her eyes are wonderful. But I never should think her quite good enough for Mr. St. Austle. I never thought myself quite good enough for him, you know."

She looked him so frankly in the face, she so honestly meant what she said, that Sir Walter was staggered into saying:

"Not good enough for him! You're good enough for the best fellow breathing—a great deal too good for me, or I should have asked you before now to be my wife."

"And I should have said before just what I say now, that I shall like very much, indeed, to be your wife," Laura said without emotion, but with agreeable earnestness. "You know all about your brother and me, so I have nothing to tell. He's the only person I have ever been engaged to before you. And I never seemed quite properly engaged to him, because I was in a fright for fear I shouldn't understand him, or bore him, or something. Now I don't feel that with you *a bit*," she added heartily, and Sir Walter tried to feel flattered by her expression of absolute confidence.

"I can't be thankful enough that you found out your mistake about Guy when you did," Sir Walter answered

gallantly. He was trying hard to forget that Laura had only found out her mistake about Guy when it appeared more than probable that Guy's fortunes would always remain at low ebb. It was more than probable, he thought now, that the girl had never cared for Guy, and that she had been hurried into the engagement by the wishes of her family. "No such pressure was being put upon her now. She was coming to him of her own free will," he told himself proudly.

"I shall give your brother a hint of this to-night," he said, in his joyous desire to make everyone around him as happy as himself.

"Do," Laura said cordially; "he has been wishing for it so much."

The phrase sounded harshly in Sir Walter's ears—"wishing for it so much!" Then the possibility of its occurring had been discussed in the Davis family. However, Laura couldn't help her people conjecturing about and diplomatizing for her. He had felt all along that they were not nearly as refined either in mind, manner, or physique as she was. But what did that matter? He was going to marry her, not them.

"It's a little chilly, shall we go in? That's a lovely waltz they're playing," she hazarded.

He put his arms round her and drew her toward him.

"Oh, my hair!" she cried gently, as he kissed her. "The worst of the parted fringe is that if half a dozen hairs get out of place you look untidy."

"Never mind, you'd look lovely if every hair on *your* head was out of place," he said rapturously.

"Oh, no, I shouldn't, I should look like one of those classical creatures, Gorgons, aren't they called?" she said, laughing. "Now, shall we go in and tell Robert?"

He would much rather have stayed with her a little longer in the sequestered summerhouse, but her will was

law in these early days. So they went in, and Robert was told.

"There's no man in the world to whom I should give my sister with so much satisfaction," he said huskily; and it was with the greatest difficulty he restrained himself from asking when the wedding would be.

Meanwhile Guy had been drawn down to the bank of the river by Miss Poynter. He had been dancing with her, hearing from her in fragmentary sentences that she had for months been in the habit of making countless studies of his head.

"The first one was a slavish copy of the big photograph Mrs. Poynter has of you," she told him, "but directly I began to draw your face I saw so much more in it than the photograph shows. I think you will see yourself more in my studies of you, sketchy as they are, than you ever saw in a likeness of yourself before."

He was not in the least flattered. Intuitively he felt that the girl had some object to gain that she might turn him to account in gaining. It was neither love of him nor admiration of him which had led her to see more and try to reproduce more in his face than the photograph had shown her.

"The portrait painter's is a charmingly interesting talent; you have evidently not laid yours up in a napkin," he said carelessly. He was wanting to be back with Mabel, and wondering what she would think of his midnight promenade with her antagonistic stepdaughter. There was not the slightest touch of sentiment, there was not the faintest attempt on her part to initiate a flirtation. In spite of her words about his face and her power of reading it, he saw that for some reason or other he was more repellent than attractive to her. At the same time he saw that he held a great interest for her. What did it mean!

Suddenly she said:

"Do you believe in telling character from handwriting?"

"If there's any character to be told—yes!"

"Will you mind giving me an old scrap of your writing?"

"You shall have a folio of manuscript that has come back with a proof of a story to-day."

"Has your writing altered much since—say several years ago?"

"Not much—not at all, I believe."

"Don't give me anything that's written on lines," she said eagerly. "I want what will look like a bit of a letter."

"You shall have it without fail to-morrow, and I trust you'll read a very pretty character from it of me."

"Oh, it's no nonsense of that sort that I'm thinking of," she said abstractedly, and when he asked her what other "motive she had for wanting a scrap of his writing," she answered brusquely:

"*That* I am not going to tell you; you may know in time. I can't say, I don't feel sure, but—— Now we'll go back and dance."

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. DAVIS SEES VISIONS.

"Now that the offer is made and accepted, I shall tell St. Austle what's the truth, and that is that I am due in town on important business, and I shall take Laura and you with me. She can't stay on in the house of the man she's engaged to; it's not the right thing to do. But I hope before we go the wedding-day will be fixed for an early date."

"But, Robert, Laura must have time to get her *trousseau!*" his wife said deprecatingly. Her husband's recently

developed anxiety to get rid of his sister puzzled and slightly alarmed her. But she was not an imaginative woman. She did not go out of her depth to meet evil half-way.

"Her *trousseau* be—I mean can't she and you together get her *trousseau* ready in a month, at the latest? What on earth should they linger on for? They're neither of them chickens! He'll be glad to settle, now he has made up his mind to it, you'll find, and I'll have no delays on our side."

"We can't ask him to hurry on the marriage, Robert. Laura's feelings must be considered. Laura would be shocked at the appearance of indecent haste."

Now that Laura was about to make a brilliant marriage, Mrs. Robert Davis felt quite tenderly toward her.

"Laura's feelings! Laura's fiddlesticks. There are other things to be considered besides *feelings* now. Her *interests* are at stake. There's many a slip between the cup and the lip. I don't want any slip to happen here."

"What *do* you want me to do, Robert?"

"You leave St. Austle to me, but impress upon Laura that there must be no shilly-shallying on her part. When he presses for an early marriage, as he will, she's to agree at once without any mock-modest hesitation."

"Very well! I'll tell her. But I can't see any reason for being in such a hurry. The engaged time is the happiest of a girl's life."

Mr. Davis almost stamped with impatience, and permitted himself to speak more roughly than he had ever spoken to his wife before.

"Look here, Anna, if any confounded nonsense of this sort is talked, and the marriage is deferred, I shall have to thank you for half ruining——"

"Robert!" the poor woman interrupted pleadingly, "don't speak, don't look at me like that. I'll do everything you wish, only I can't see——"

"You surely can see to do what I tell you, my dear Anna," he said more temperately, and his dear Anna promised that she would obey his directions to the letter.

Sir Walter not only met, but outstripped Mr. Davis' views on the subject of an early marriage. He had not only brought himself up to the point of being very much in love with his beautiful, placid betrothed, but some of her money would be useful to him, and that right soon. His losses on the turf and on his breeding farm had been heavier lately than anyone surmised, much less knew—with the exception of himself and his bankers. It was not at all immaterial to him that the beautiful woman he was going to marry was—through her brother's wise investments and good management—a wealthy woman.

"Davis is a fellow who would never have anything to do with any concern that's not as sound as a bell," Sir Walter told Guy, when the latter asked where Laura's money was. "Davis is a very long-headed, far-sighted fellow. I haven't bothered myself about details, but he told me the other day that his ostensible business—the varnish—is merely one of the smaller irons he has in the fire."

"Sorry to hear it. I'm not fond of unmentionable big irons myself," Guy said. "However, *his* affairs don't concern us, so long as Laura is all safe."

"Oh, safe! Safe as houses," Walter responded confidently. Then he went on to say that he was glad to find that his brother and his bride-elect were on such good terms.

"Good terms!" Guy echoed. "My dear old boy, who could help being on good terms with such an awfully sweet, nice woman as Laura is, and always has been since the day I knew her first? You didn't think I was going to bear malice because she threw me over long ago, did you?"

"Well, hardly!" Walter said hesitatingly, for he remembered how uncommonly pleased Guy had been to be thrown over.

"It will come off soon, I hope. I want to see you turned off before I start for Australia."

"Australia? What are you going to Australia for?"

"Like the country, and want to run a play in Melbourne before I try my luck with it here."

"What an unsettled chap you are!" Walter said feelingly.

"Haven't had much to settle me yet," his brother replied, half smiling, half sighing. "'Settling' for me would mean now subsiding in comfortable, apathetic, selfish, semi-idleness in bachelor's quarters in London, where I should run in a groove and soon rust out. I have plenty of work in me still, but to do it properly I must get out of the old country for a time."

"How would Laura like Australia for the honeymoon trip, I wonder? A grand idea, Guy. I'll write and propose it to her. When must you go—August?"

"I thought of leaving Plymouth in the *Maori Queen* on the 20th of August——"

"Then I'll ask Laura to make me the happiest man on earth on the 15th, and we'll join you at Plymouth on the 20th. I wish you were taking a wife of your own out, Guy; you'd settle fast enough then!"

Guy puffed away unexcitedly at his cigarette, examined the petals of a York and Lancaster rose carefully, and said—nothing!

"I was rather in hopes that something would come of Mrs. Poynter's visit here," Walter went on nervously. He was quite boyishly anxious to see his brother as happy in holy wedlock as he himself meant soon to be. It had always been so with Walter. He always had wanted to see Guy in the possession of every pleasant thing which fell to

his own share. In his inexperience he believed that his wife was going to prove the pleasantest thing the world had yet bestowed upon him, so, naturally, he wanted Guy to have a wife, too.

"Something did come of Mrs. Poynter's visit here. I got fonder of her than I'd been before, and, God knows, *that* was needless," Guy said gruffly. He hated having his feelings laid bare and dissected by the hand of fraternal affection. At the same time he loved Walter better than ever for showing such interest in him at this crisis of his (Walter's) own life.

"And she?"

"She managed always to put me off when I was on the point of telling her so."

"Yet, if ever a woman was in love with a man in her life, Mrs. Poynter is in love with you," Walter said as solemnly as if he were stating a fact with which Guy was presumably totally unacquainted.

"She likes me, I know that," the latter said thoughtfully; "but something holds her back. She's always holding herself in check, yet there's no mortal reason why we two shouldn't join hands and go along the road together. No other woman has ever interested me and fulfilled all my requirements in a woman as she does; and I believe, if she could be made to speak out, that she would say that it's the same on her side about me. But some cursed shadow has stepped in between us, and—well! perhaps I may find solace in dramatic success in Australia, to say nothing of the smiles of Australian girls."

"Do you think she loses under old Poynter's will if she marries again?" Walter suggested prosaically.

"I don't know. That's a thing that wouldn't deter her. She knows I've enough for both."

"She's a very independent spirited woman. She wouldn't like owing everything to her husband, even to you."

"It's not that, I'm sure, but what is it, God only knows! It's a *good* motive. On that I would stake my life. Mabel couldn't be actuated by any but a good motive."

His eyes grew deeply tender as he spoke about her, and the blue eyes of his more emotional brother filled with sympathetic tears.

"Dear old Guy!" he said fervently. "It's beastly hard that *I* should have it all my own way, as I've had it all along, while you, my other half, come in for such a lot of roughnesses. I get the woman I want above every other woman, and, as it happens, she'll bring me the money I happen to want at the present moment, also; while you can't get the woman you want, and who wants you, without regard to money at all, but simply because there's some beastly back-stairs, evil influence at work between you. Do you think it's that stepdaughter?" Then he told Guy how Ella had slipped out from the cozy writing corner upon Mrs. Poynter and himself one day, and repeated as well as he could remember the words she had used.

"Poor little Ella! it's rather rough on her to be suspected of scheming," Guy said compassionately. Without being a vain man, there was human nature enough about him to make him feel very tolerantly toward a girl who had taken so much trouble in doing justice to his characteristic face. He had unquestionably interested Miss Poynter, he felt; though he did not think for a moment that there was any tender feeling in the interest. Her scarcely veiled antagonism to her stepmother struck him as being "childish," and absolutely of no consequence at all. He attributed it to her filial loyalty to her dead mother, and rather respected her for the sentiment, though he was sorry to see it leveled against the woman he loved.

Just before leaving Trelyn—the party had broken up and dispersed as soon as Laura's engagement to the host was announced—Ella had taken Guy aside and told him that

she had found out what she wanted to know from his handwriting, and that what she had found out had made her like him better than she had done before. "Perhaps some day I may tell you why I wanted it," she had added. "I certainly shall do so if I can save you from making a very, very, *very* terrible mistake."

At the time he had laughed at the comic solemnity of her words and manner. There was something ludicrous in the idea of this girl, who appeared to be rather slow witted and ill informed on every other subject than painting, taking him under her small wing, and according him the promise of her protection, should need for it arise. She had seen his smile of amusement and been nettled by it. But she had shown no resentment at the time. He was sure to put himself in the position she had predicted. And then! Well! then it would be time enough to let him know why she had tried to familiarize herself with his character through the mediumship of his features and handwriting.

Perhaps not even the bridegroom-elect was more impatient for the wedding-day to arrive than was his brother, for Mrs. Poynter was to be one of the guests, and Guy had no fair excuse for presenting himself before her until that time. Indeed, she had told him that she and her stepdaughter would not go back to town till the eve of the wedding, and though she had told him she should "be moving about" till that time, she had not given him her flying addresses. So he remained at Trelyn Towers with Walter, and improved the time by polishing up the play which he intended taking to Australia with him.

It was well for Sir Walter, at this juncture, that he had such a felicitous matrimonial prospect before him, for another piece of ill-luck befell him in his training stables. This time it was The Promise of May, the filly who was intended to be the "crop of the bunch of three-year-olds"

the following year, who went wrong. No blame attached to anyone, either to her trainer or to the boy who rode her and loved her better than his life, but a back sinew was strained, and all hope of the faultless filly being an Ascot winner next year was over.

Meanwhile at Norwood preparations for Laura's marriage were being made with the lavish liberality which had been Robert Davis' great characteristic since he had begun to amass wealth by other means than that of his ostensible business, the manufacture, namely, of varnish. Every friend, and nearly every acquaintance on either side was bidden to the banquet and ball which were to be given in honor of the alliance. The contingent of aristocratic people, Sir Walter's following, was small in comparison with the masses who belonged to the Davis faction. But they (the aristocrats) were likely to make up for the smallness of their numbers by the magnitude of their condescension in coming so far from the borders of their own world as the merchant prince's house at Norwood. And the city faction were nearly all rich to a degree that was revolting to the other side, and fully equal to the latter in arrogance.

But the probably conflicting claims of the rival factions at the forthcoming auspicious function was a matter of supreme indifference to the Davises. Laura herself was blissfully regardless of everything but the supreme fact that she was going to marry an extremely nice man, who would never expect her to understand anything she didn't care about; be the mistress of an extremely nice house to which she could invite everyone who had ever been kind to her, for the purpose of being kind to them in return, and do exactly as she liked without having to "consult Anna." Not that she had ever fancied that she writhed and suffered torture under the harrow of Mrs. Davis' rule, but she had always been good-temperedly conscious that the rule was

there, and that she would be restricted by it, did she ever attempt to venture beyond its modest bounds.

Mrs. Davis was busily engaged with big, munificent household cares which she delighted in encountering, as she was so well supplied with the munitions of war to meet them. And as for Mr. Davis, he had far more important matters to think of than possible collisions between the "swells" whom he pretended to despise, and those mighty moneyed magnates for whom he had a sincere veneration.

As the day of his sister's marriage approached his spirits became so buoyant, not to say boyishly volatile, that those who knew him best—his wife and Laura—were convinced that some more than ordinarily brilliant stroke of fortune had befallen him. He was so exuberant in manner that visions of his being knighted—or perhaps even being made a peer—for some big financial service rendered to the government or the country at large, floated cloudily through Mrs. Davis' rather vague but trusting mind. She had gathered from some source or other—not directly from her husband—that he was connected with a private bank, and she knew that bankers were sometimes ennobled for no other particular reason than because they were exorbitantly rich. She allowed herself to dream of having a voice in the selection of the title, and thought that the name of their Norwood house, "Rezare," would do very well. "Lady Rezare!" She almost heard her name called out at the first drawing room which she would of course attend next season, and condescendingly resolved that Laura, who would be Lady St. Austle by that time, should have the honor of presenting her. But like a wise woman she kept these visions to herself, not even hinting them to Laura, and concealing from Robert that she was noticing his exhilaration of spirit and manner.

"Dear Robert! he wants to give me a pleasant surprise by and by," she thought affectionately, and so she would

not thwart him in his intention, or blunt the point of it by appearing to anticipate the glories of which she dreamt.

Poor Mrs. Davis!

CHAPTER X.

"ON BORDER-LAND 'TWIXT HATE AND LOVE."

ELLA POYNTER sat in her own room in her stepmother's house in Kensington. It was the prettiest bedroom in the house—commanded the best view of the not very far distant gardens, had the sunniest aspect, and was rendered more interesting than any of the other rooms by reason of having two or three odd recesses in it. It always seemed to the girl herself that Mrs. Poynter was trying to make up to her for something! That "something" Miss Ella shrewdly suspected would not redound to Mrs. Poynter's credit if it were ever made public. Ella believed herself to be on the track of it, and she had no scruples in following it up by fair or foul means. She felt pitiless toward her father's widow! Years of unbroken kindness which she had received from Mabel only made the girl still more dislike the woman who had stepped into her own dear dead mother's place, and so acquired the right and the power to show those kindnesses. Her heart swelled with jealous rage as she thought of "how happy she would have made dear papa; how, probably, his happiness would have kept him alive till now" if this soft-eyed, fascinating, sympathetic woman had not "wheedled" him into marrying her. Ella always took it for granted that Mabel had exerted all her arts to lure the late Mr. Poynter into matrimony, and she thought and spoke of her stepmother to her most familiar friends as having run after "poor dear papa in the most barefaced manner."

They had come back to town two or three days ago, and now Ella sat in her room comparing the scraps of manuscript which Guy had given her with a well-worn letter which was lying on the table before her. Close by, a very exquisitely and faithfully painted miniature portrait of Guy stood propped up on a small table easel. It annoyed Mrs. Poynter, Ella knew, that she should possess so perfect a likeness of Guy, painted by herself. Therefore she had it very much *en évidence* in her room, and arranged fresh flowers before it daily, after the manner of a shrine.

Moreover, another feeling than hatred of Mrs. Poynter had crept into the girl's heart concerning this likeness and its original. From the moment she discovered that his handwriting did not tally with the writing of the letter before her, she had allowed her artistic and womanly appreciation of his manly good looks to take possession of her. She nourished and cherished her fancy for him, idealizing him, and endowing him with many qualities which she thought a man ought to possess. But she did not give him credit for the stanchness, the sincerity, and real, manly, pure honorableness which were among his stronger characteristics.

That he had been, and still was, in love with the stepmother of whom she (Ella) so cordially disapproved, she felt vexedly sure. But this love should receive such a shock soon, she resolved, as would kill it forever. She gloated over the well worn, much read letter that was lying open before her! She filled her mind and charged her memory with some of its passionate phrases! She longed to know what manner of man he was; *he* who addressed those hot, compromising words, in confidence that they would be well received, to her *father's wife!*

There was not the slightest doubt about it in Ella's mind. She had found the letter ticketed "from my false wife's lover" in a drawer of her father's writing table just after

his death, before anyone else had meddled with his papers. It never occurred to her to think that there could be any mistake about it anywhere, any weak place in the strong chain of evidence which she believed she had gathered into her own hands against her stepmother. The terms in which that letter was couched were plainly and unmistakably disgraceful and dishonorable. Ella's cheeks had reddened with burning shame when she read them first, but she was hardened now by her hatred of Mabel, and if the latter would have been pulled down and crushed to the earth by the publicity of them, Ella would have read them aloud without hesitation in the market-place to-morrow.

It was as thoroughly compromising a letter as a passionate, careless man has ever penned to the weak, wicked woman who has trusted and confided in him. It began by addressing her as his "own darling, between whom and himself nothing could come." It reminded her of a dozen indiscretions of which they had been guilty "during old Poynter's frequent absences." It passionately averred that in all but name he regarded her as his wife, and implored her, his "own darling M.," to come to him entirely and cast aside those few remaining fettering scruples which bound her to a husband and a home she hated. It promised her ease, love, luxury, if she would be brave and dare the world, instead of living the "crippled life of lying, to keep up appearances," which she was struggling to do. It jeered and laughed at, ridiculed and insulted, the husband from whom he had lured her. And it wound up with the assertion that he was "hers till death!" but there was no signature.

No wonder that the blood of the girl whose father had been so tricked and degraded, boiled as she read the scorching phrases of illicit love. No wonder that she longed to wreak some subtle revenge upon the fair-seeming woman to whom this letter was written, and in whose

guilt she confidently believed. The only wonder was that she had held her avenging young hand so long. But she had done so with the hope of striking the more surely, and now she was to be rewarded for her hardly sustained patience, she told herself ; for she would be able to strike the sinner a deadly blow through her love for the honest, honorable gentleman who believed her (Mabel Poynter) to be a pure, virtuous woman.

"When I'm sure of her; when he has asked her to be his wife, and she has got over her pretended reluctance and accepted him; then I'll hand him this letter and poor papa's note upon it, and see him read it before her face." This had been Ella's first intention. But before long—as soon indeed as she began to entertain warm feelings toward Mr. St. Austle herself—she determined to intervene with that damning letter before Mabel could taste the delights of being engaged to Guy St. Austle even for a day.

She was making ready to throw down the glove as she sat in her pretty room, surrounded by a dozen evidences of her stepmother's thoughtful consideration for her. They had only just come home, and half the day had been spent in inspecting and trying on the dresses and hats which they were going to wear at Laura Davis' wedding, two days hence. And now Ella was resting a bit before she went down to afternoon tea.

"There are sure to be half a dozen people buzzing round her, and if *he's* one of the number I'll introduce a subject that young ladies don't generally discuss, for the sake of seeing that woman shiver," Ella thought as she slipped into a tea-jacket of a hue and texture that suited her clear brown complexion and supple, girlish little figure well.

"Oh, it's hateful ! *hateful!* to see a man you like and could love *worthily*, if he'd ask you, taken up with such a piece of vicious falsity as Mrs. Poynter," Ella said aloud in her jealous, angry vindictiveness. "But when once he has

read that letter, written to her by a scoundrel whom she loved while poor dear papa was alive, he'll hate her and leave her ! leave her, and I shall laugh at her, and she won't dare to round upon me. And he shall show that he scorns her, or I'll—I'll——"

In her impotent wrath she did not know what to threaten or what she was saying. It was like a douche of cold water in her heated face when, after knocking, her stepmother's maid opened the door and said :

"My mistress' love, and will you come down, Miss Poynter? Mr. St. Austle and other visitors are in the drawing room."

"I will go down directly," Ella gasped, as composedly as she could ; but, in spite of her utmost endeavor to seem cool and unconcerned, her agitation was very palpable.

"I think Miss Ella must have been play-acting all by herself," the maid told her fellows at the kitchen tea that evening. "She was ranting away at a fine rate when I knocked at her door, and when I opened it there she was leaning on her elbows before her glass, staring at her own face as if she had never seen it before. I can't see anything to make a fuss about in Miss Ella's looks. She has pretty eyes, that I will say for her ; but her skin's as brown as a berry. She's not to be looked at in the same day as Mrs. Poynter."

"She's a deal younger," the page remarked approvingly. He was in the intermediate state, too old for a page boy proper, and too young to be called a footman. Still he was of an age to make observations about the other sex.

Miss Poynter was her quiet little, rather repressed self by the time she reached the drawing room. Her eyes dilated and deepened at sight of Guy St. Austle, with whom she was doing her best to fall desperately in love, with a view to winning him away effectually from the pernicious wiles of her abhorred stepmother. It was clearly her duty

to do all that was in her power to save an honorable gentleman—" such a good-looking one, too—" from the evil fate of becoming the trusting husband of her (Ella's) father's false wife. It counted for nothing with Ella that the evil doer was perfectly quiescent in the matter of Guy St. Austle, that, in fact, she made no effort whatever to beguile him or lead him on. He was beguiled by her, and he was following her up, and Ella thought it a heinous and mean sin on her stepmother's part that those things should be.

The other visitors drifted away one by one until Guy only was left. While the others remained Mrs. Poynter had devoted herself more exclusively to them, leaving Guy to be entertained by Ella; and while this state of things lasted Ella let her purpose of covering her stepmother with ignominy be in abeyance. But as soon as Mrs. Poynter was free to join in their conversation, unfettered by the rival claims of other guests, Ella began to work her own spirit up to a properly vindictive pitch, for the purpose of overwhelming the wrong doer with well deserved humiliation. She was panting for an opportunity of introducing the subject which should surely sting Mrs. Poynter; and presently that unconscious woman made what Ella thought a good one.

"Have you seen Miss Davis since you have been in town?" Mrs. Poynter asked. "I heard from her the other day; she seems to be very happy. What a sweet, trustful, unexacting nature she has!"

"I went to call on them yesterday, with Walter, and left that blessed individual there to dine. They both seemed very jolly, I thought. She will suit Walter splendidly, counteract his restlessness, and never irritate his nerves by being irritable herself!" Guy said heartily; and Ella put in sententiously:

"I hope she will never deceive your brother, Mr. St.

Austle. Those quiet women have a way of deceiving their husbands sometimes, I've heard."

"I don't think there's any fear of that," Guy laughed; while Mabel, with a heightened color and rather a perturbed manner, said:

"I don't think you or any of us are called upon to discuss such possibilities."

"I suppose you think that I, an unmarried girl, ought to pretend to be ignorant of such improper 'possibilities,'" Ella said eagerly, with as near an approach to a sneer as she dared venture to execute, under the clear, disapproving gaze of her stepmother; "but, unfortunately," the girl went on hurriedly, "they are possibilities that one can't help thinking about, as we see so many of them realized. Look here!" she added, picking up a weekly journal, "see this long paragraph about Lord Deriot having commenced divorce proceedings against his wife. I wonder how he found her out? I wonder if he found a letter from her lover! That's the way half——"

"Ella!" Mrs. Poynter interrupted. There was a ring of sharp pain in her voice, as she uttered the single word, that made Ella's heart leap with malicious joy, and gave Guy an uneasy feeling, he could not fancy why.

"Why do you say 'Ella' like that, and try to stop me, Mrs. Poynter? Mr. St. Austle wouldn't believe me if I pretended to be ignorant of such horrible things as married women's faithlessness and sin. I was only going to say that it's through indiscreet letters—so I have heard—that half the women are found out. Why, you're looking as much shocked as if you had never even heard the subject mentioned before! Lord Deriot isn't like some husbands I've heard of. He isn't going to forgive his wicked wife and die quietly of a broken heart."

Her eyes flashed fire, her bosom heaved, her words fell like shot on her hearers' ears. Mrs. Poynter looked at her

in surprise, dashed with anger and pity. How much did the girl know? Did she know anything, or had she hit upon this terrible topic in mere malevolent inadvertence? Mabel forced her mind away from the subject, and tried to reintroduce that social calm in the atmosphere which Ella had disturbed.

"You still mean to go to Australia?" she asked of Guy, and he answered:

"Unless something very unforeseen occurs within the next ten days." Then he went on to tell her that there was a strong vein of colonial interest in his new play, and so successfully took the conversation away from those dangerous divorce depths into which Ella had plunged it. But though he did this, though he went on ably seconding all Mabel's effort to keep the conversation on a light social level, Ella saw that he looked pained and thoughtful, and hugged herself with delight at the idea of having implanted the first seed of doubt in his mind.

"It's my duty to papa—to poor dear papa who *died* of that woman's wickedness—to expose her, and save poor Guy St. Austle from her toils. Why should she have everything? Papa's money—and me dependent on her! and Guy's love! She ought to be punished in this world; poor papa spared her, but I don't see that I am called on to do it. She ought to go through some of the open shame and misery that other women who have done wrong have to suffer *here*. How do I know that she'll be punished hereafter? She may repent and be forgiven. Besides, if she is punished, I shan't know it. I want to see her humbled here, and I want her to lose Guy's love. When she's *quite* humbled and he hates her, I think I can be kind to her; perhaps, I even might go so far as to ask him to speak to her. But she must suffer first! Oh, yes! she must suffer first."

It had become a fixed idea—more than that, a religion—with Ella Poynter that she was the chosen instrument

through whom Mrs. Poynter's nose was to be brought to the grindstone. There were moments when she could not help remembering how uniformly kind and considerate the ill-starred woman had been to her (Ella), since the day of her father's marriage until now. But these were moments of weakness, Ella thought, and so she lived through them and blotted them out as quickly as possible. They were most successfully blotted out now, when she was forced to admit that her stepmother was looking remarkably attractive, and that Guy St. Austle was visibly very much alive to the fact.

"How can he bear to hanker after other men's leavings!" the girl thought angrily. "Oh, he *shall* know—he shall know that she is not only poor papa's widow, but that she was a *forgiven wife!* a woman some other man left, and papa had pity upon! He shall know it! He ought to know it for his own sake—and mine."

"We shall not meet again till the wedding-day," Mabel was saying very decidedly, while these thoughts were filtering through her stepdaughter's little brain. "I hope the sun will shine very brightly upon them; I hope every omen will be auspicious that day."

Ella's body and soul knit themselves together resolutely, and strengthened her to make yet another effort to corner and confuse the wrong-doer. Her lithe little figure shivered through every muscle and nerve as she fixed her big purple eyes on her stepmother as she asked:

"Did the sun shine brightly on *you* the day you married papa? Were all the omens auspicious *then?* If they were, I don't believe in omens."

"There was no sunshine about on the day I married your father; it was midwinter, and a hard black frost reigned," Mrs. Poynter said coldly. "Must you go now, Mr. St. Austle? I won't say good-by, for we shall meet again before you go to Australia."

"And so shall we," Ella said eagerly. "I want to give you a plot for a play, Mr. St. Austle—a plot from real life! I'll tell it to you when I see you again."

"Young ladies should know nothing of plots or plotting," he answered carelessly, and Ella felt insulted by his indifference.

CHAPTER XI.

"SO HIGHLY RESPECTED."

"MR. DAVIS seems to feel parting with his sister terribly," several of the guests remarked to one another, when—the ceremony over—they were strolling about the reception rooms at Rezare, looking at the costly wedding gifts which were strewn about. Laura's circle of friends and acquaintances had been liberal in their marks of approbation of her choice of a husband, and of her lot in life being so admirably well cast. The city people had come down with such an amount of jewelry and silver as would have enabled Laura to start a jeweler's and silversmith's shop with a good stock in trade, and Sir Walter's set had contributed a fair number of exceedingly pretty, if less expensive, articles. Altogether, the show of wedding presents was a very brilliant one, and Lady St. Austle was radiant with pleasure at the sight of it. In fact the only person who was not radiant with pleasure on the occasion was the master of the gorgeous house, the brother of the radiant bride, Robert Davis, the millionaire and city man, himself.

There was a magnificent banquet, to which over two hundred guests sat down; and, in spite of Sir Walter's prayers and entreaties, the speech-makers seemed about to have it all their own appalling way, when an awkward and startling interruption occurred.

The oldest friend of the family, the donor of the most

magnificent of the three diamond necklaces which had been bestowed upon lucky Laura, had faltered and staggered through numerous elongated and involved sentences, and had wound up with a burst of well-meant but incomprehensible emotion in praise and laudation of the bride, and Sir Walter had replied tersely and happily. Then someone else had proposed the health of their honored and estimable friend, Mr. Davis, the brother of the bride, and Mr. Davis was just getting on his legs to reply, when the untoward incident occurred.

It came in the form of that modern messenger of fate, a telegram; and as Mr. Davis read it his jaw dropped, a sickly pallor overspread his face, and he sank down into his chair like one who has had a bad blow or an attack of faintness.

Two hundred pairs of eyes were on him, for the attention of the whole party had been enforcedly bestowed upon him when he rose to return thanks, and at least a hundred pairs of lips questioned eagerly, "What is the matter?" He fought valiantly for a moment with his weakness, rose up again, thanked them briefly, and, under cover of the cheers and confusion that followed, slipped out of the room, unnoticed by everyone apparently but his wife.

In a minute she had followed him up into his dressing room. He was standing before an open escritoire, hurriedly filling a pocketbook with banknotes and papers, his hands trembling like aspen leaves, an unaccountable look of crouch in his bearing and of dread in his eyes.

"Robert!"

Her hand was on his arm as she spoke his name, with a ring of such tenderness in her voice as he had never heard before. The impatient scowl which had overspread his face when he thought that she had followed him "out of curiosity, to pry into his affairs," vanished as he realized the depth of loving sympathy which her tender tones revealed.

"God forgive me for having distrusted her; but my trust in everyone, in everything, is shaken," he thought, as he stooped to kiss her, at the same time putting her gently out of the way.

"Go back to our guests, Anna, dear. They will think there is something amiss if we are both absent. Go back at once!"

"There is something amiss," she said sorrowfully.

"No, no! A mere business matter gone a trifle wrong. I must go and settle it. Go back to our guests; be brave, keep up a good heart; don't—don't let them suspect anything yet."

"Robert!" There was a sharp ring of anguish in her tone now. "There is something wrong, terribly wrong; I see it in your face. Something dreadful is going to happen. Keep me with you!" she cried suddenly; "let me help you."

"You will help me best by going back to our guests. I must go, now at once; time is of vital importance. I can't stay to explain—I will write to you to-night. Go back, and don't say that I have left home. Let them think I shall rejoin them presently. Go back! for Heaven's sake, go back!"

He had been hurrying a few articles of clothing into a Gladstone as he spoke, and now he stood, bag in hand, looking strangely hunted and wild, she thought. She read ruin in his face and manner, but never for a moment did she think of how she herself would be affected by it. Her first thought was for him, her second for the little boys, for whom she had already begun to plan brilliant futures.

"Kiss the children before you go, Robert," she pleaded. "Yes, yes! I will go back to the company at once."

"Go! Kiss the boys for me. I will write to-night," he jerked out. Then he stepped to the window which opened on to one of the terraces that ran up to the second story at

the back of the house. "Good-by! I'll write to-night," he said, smiling in a ghastly way that thrilled her with far more pain than if he had scowled. "Keep up, Anna; don't let them think anything yet!"

He was gone! He had sneaked out of his own house in a way that shocked her, but not a single doubt or suspicion of him crossed her mind. Something terrible had happened, that was clear enough; and she must do her best to help him in the way he had commanded. Her brain was throbbing, her hands were cold and clammy with the anguish of her nervousness. But after a moment or two she steadied her limbs, and went back to the banquet from which she had scarcely been missed.

To one or two of those who sat near to her she remarked that "a business man's time was never his own," dressing her poor anxious face with a false smile as she spoke. It seemed to her that everyone at those magnificently decorated tables must be conscious of and wondering about the absence of the giver of the feast. But as a matter of fact, no one but herself missed him, much less marveled at his disappearance.

It was a gorgeous feast, and no one was anxious to curtail it. The different cliques separated and respectively enjoyed themselves, each disparaging the other set with much complacency. The few with whom this story has to do were too happy in their own immediate present to take any note of the hostess' air of suppressed distress. Sir Walter and his bride, as became them, were light-heartedly indifferent to everyone but themselves, and Guy St. Austle sat next to the woman who, he knew, loved him as dearly as he loved her, though she persisted in so unaccountably holding aloof from him. On his other side was Ella, well satisfied for the time being to get his divided attention, since she felt sure that in good time she would be able to *open his eyes* to the worthlessness of the woman who at

present held his infatuated heart in her unworthy thrall. No! not his heart! Ella didn't like to think that it was his heart which her stepmother controlled. It was his vanity that Mrs. Poynter flattered, and by that means obtained and maintained a pernicious ascendency over him. All, even the best men are vain, the girl argued, and those horrid, middle-aged women, especially the ones with wicked experience, knew exactly how to pander to this special masculine vein. "Now, I will never flatter him! Guy shall never get anything but the simple truth from me, however painful it may be for him to hear it," the stern young moralist thought. And all the while she was flattering him by every art of which she was the innocent mistress; listening to the few words he let drop for her individual benefit as if they were valuable as refined gold, or diamonds of the purest luster, and (subtlest flattery of all) showing the keenest annoyance whenever he gave absorbed attention to Mrs. Poynter, her words and wants.

There was no flagging in the hilarity. All was going as merrily as the proverbial marriage-bell when Lady St. Austle rose to go and change to her traveling dress. Then for the first time she observed the absence of her brother.

"Where is Robert?" she said, addressing no one in particular, and her question remained unanswered, for at the same moment the butler approached his mistress and whispered something to her rapidly.

In a few minutes confusion reigned throughout the assemblage of unthinking guests. Rumors were heard of a bank having stopped payment under odd circumstances. The presence of the arm of the law was felt in the atmosphere. Mr. Davis was wanted, and was not forthcoming. Mrs. Davis, when questioned, was dumb with shame and fear for the husband by whom she was determined to stick, whatever might befall *him*. Strange men came in and

assumed airs of being within their rights, when they took possession of everything they found on the premises, including Laura's wedding presents. "It's the biggest private bank failure that's been known for half a century," one of the unwelcome incomers told half a dozen of the upper servants in confidence, "and your governor's one of the slipperiest rascals out. Lucky for him if he isn't a lifer, if he's caught—and he can't have got far; they're sure to catch him."

The two women, the wife and sister, rushed away in such privacy as they could find, and cried together over the appalling, inexplicable blow which had fallen upon them. "Send everyone away," Mrs. Davis had implored of Sir Walter when the first murmurs arose. "Make them all go. There's something dreadful has happened, and poor Robert has gone up to the City to meet it instead of waiting here. You know what Robert is? You know that he wouldn't waste a moment when business calls him. Make all the people go, Walter; the sound of them in his house when he's away from it in trouble drives me mad."

"They shall all go, and—I'll not take Laura away from you to-day," Sir Walter replied, with an impetuous gulp. He realized, quite as fully as the unhappy wife did, that ruin had fallen upon Robert Davis, and he grasped another fact which she battled against entertaining yet. Ruin was not the worst thing from which Robert Davis had fled. Fraud and disgrace were in the atmosphere that surrounded his abrupt and surreptitious departure. "Thank God, I can take Laura clear away from it all," he thought manfully, as he faced inquiries and put the best coloring he could upon the ugly subject; "her sweet heart would have broken from this trouble if she had not had me to turn to."

When he said that he would not take Laura away from her, all that was unselfish in Mrs. Davis' nature rose up.

"Give me the only happiness I can have till Robert

comes back," she said. "Let me feel that Laura is safe and happy and away from all this trouble, Walter. He always thought so much of his sister, you know. It would half kill him if he thought that a business trouble of his spoilt her wedding-day. And the trouble will be over soon, whatever it is. Robert has such a splendid head, and he's thought so highly of in the city."

She spoke with a good show of confidence in her own assertion that all would be well soon, and that Robert would come back, but all the time, poor woman, her heart belied her words. Sir Walter saw through the brave effort of wifely loyalty, and knew that the kindest thing he could do for the poor harassed woman, would be to rid her of the presence of everyone before whom she felt it incumbent on her to hold up. So he dismissed the guests with as little lame an explanation as he was capable of uttering, and prepared to take his wife away.

"Don't mind, dear," Laura said affectionately to her sister-in-law as she was taking leave; "if Robert has lost a lot of money, he is welcome to the fortune he has made for me. Walter would have every penny settled on me, you know, so I can do what I like with it, and we shall both like to give it to dear old Robert!"

"O Laura! thank God, thank God, your money is safe," Mrs. Davis sobbed. "His children and I have the right to suffer with him, but he has been a good guardian to you, Laura, dear—a good guardian, and a good brother! I can always feel proud of him for the way he has taken care of you."

"And everything will come right soon," Laura said soothingly, between tears and smiles, "and until it does, Robert must use my money as if it were his own. Walter is rich; we shan't want it. The carriage at the door, is it? Oh, I *must* go, but it's dreadful to leave you like this."

She ran down hastily, trying to smile hopefully at the frightened servants, as she passed groups of them who were standing about to watch her departure. Her brother's carriage was to take her to the station, but she had scarcely seated herself, and been followed into it by her husband, when a tumult arose.

Some of the men in possession objected to such valuable horses being taken off the premises under the existing circumstances. In other words, the horses and carriage were seized, and it was in a common hired fly that Sir Walter and Lady St. Austle drove away from Rezare.

"You will let Robert use my money till he gets his own back again, won't you?" Laura asked cheerfully, when they were steaming away from Southampton to the Isle of Wight, where the first few days of their honeymoon were to be spent. And Sir Walter could not help looking rather rueful as he answered:

"Don't be very much cut up, my darling, if we find that your brother has used it already. Things must have come to a terrible pass before this could have happened."

Laura looked thoughtful, but not very much distressed.

"Do you think he will be poor now?" she asked. "Will they have to give up Rezare? Poor Anna! she was thinking what a pretty title it would be if they made Robert a peer."

"I don't think 'they' are likely to do that," Walter said gravely, "but we'll hope for the best, and if they have to give up Rezare, we'll find a prettier place for them down in Cornwall, near Trelyn. By the way, Laura, I think we will settle down at Trelyn as soon as we can, and give up the Australian scheme. What do you say?"

"I say that whatever you want to do is best. I don't like the sea very much, and I do like Trelyn. Poor Robert! he won't like settling down in the country at all, so I hope it won't come to as bad as that for him. He's a City man,

born and bred, you know, Walter. It will be hard to turn him into a country gentleman."

"Very hard, but we must do our best," said Sir Walter.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. GREG.

When Robert Davis escaped from his own house and grounds unmolested, he counted himself a fortunate man, in spite of the mass of misery which had crashed down upon him. The dread of being arrested, like a common felon, had been upon him from the moment that telegram had been put into his hands. Defaulter, forger, swindler, as he knew himself to be, he still retained a considerable portion of that proper pride which becomes a prominent City man. If he could once get out of the country, without first standing in the dock, life might still hold something worth living for. He tried to bestow a little approval upon himself for having got Laura so well settled before the crash came. This marriage, which he had managed for her, would in a measure compensate her for the loss of every penny she possessed in the world. At any rate, the St. Austle pride would intervene between Laura, who was one of them now, and want of any kind. About his sister, he told himself, his mind might be perfectly at rest.

Then he thought of his wife and boys!

Perhaps for them it would be better if he put a bullet through his head without any further delay. As the widow and children of a suicide, they would receive more consideration from a compassionate world than they were likely to get as the wife and children of a living swindler! But, personally, the idea of blowing out his brains was repugnant to him. If he *could only* get clear away out of the

country, his Gladstone was sufficiently well stuffed with banknotes to enable him to make a new start under a new name. Then Anna and his children could rejoin him, and this distressing incident should be blotted out of their lives.

He had roamed on, in an indefinite way, while thinking these thoughts. Instinct had taught him to avoid the railway station, where he felt tolerably sure a detective and a fond embrace from handcuffs were awaiting him. He could not walk about all day with that "infernal compromising bag" in his hand. No one would think of searching for him in the immediate vicinity of his own home. It was here, of course, that seclusion and safety could be found until the vigilance of the bloodhounds of the law relaxed a bit. He turned down a lane as his ruminations reached this point, and found himself walking abreast of a line of detached cottages of gentility on the one side, and a prettily planted row of evergreen shrubs and fir trees on the other. In two or three of these cottage windows cards bearing the words, "Lodgings to let," were hanging up. He knocked at the door of one of these, and it was opened to him at once by a handsome woman, who struck him at once as being out of keeping with her surroundings.

"I see you have lodgings to let?" he began politely. "I should like to take them for a week or two, but I am a stranger, an American; I can't offer you any references."

She had led the way into a pretty little sitting room as he was speaking, and after asking him to be seated she went on carelessly:

"I am a stranger here also. I can give you no references, therefore all I ask of you is the rent, two guineas a week, in advance for a fortnight. An American are you? How singularly well and without accent you speak our mother tongue!"

"It's a mistake to think that the nasal drawl is indispensable," he laughed. He was beginning to feel quite hilar-

ious, and as if he were playing in a light comedy. Already his past life seemed to have retreated very far into the background. He quite felt like the stranger in the land which he proclaimed himself to be. He wanted rest and time to think, so much! "Anna and the children would be right enough! Someone would look after them until he could pull himself together, and assume his proper place again. Meantime this was a snug little hiding place, and the woman who kept it was a lady and wouldn't worry him."

He unpacked and locked away his belongings in the drawers that were placed at his disposal in the bedroom, and by the time he went back into the adjoining sitting room it was six o'clock. The longing to see an evening paper to read the paragraph about his own awful smash was upon him, but he did not dare to go and get one from the station. He rang the bell, and it was answered by his landlady herself.

"Is there such a thing as an evening paper to be got near here?" he asked; "have you a servant whom you can send for one?"

"Will you have *The Globe?* It has just been brought to me, you are welcome to it," she told him. She brought it in presently, and he saw that her eyes were fixed upon a column, headed by the words, in big letters:

"Fraudulent Failure of a Bank. Hundreds Ruined. Startling Revelations."

His hand shook as he took the paper from her.

"Thank you, Mrs.—Mrs.—I beg your pardon! I have not asked your name yet?"

"I am called Mrs. Greg," she said carelessly, "and your name is——?"

"Denham—Robert Denham," he said, remembering, "providentially," as he said to himself, that his linen and hat-lining were marked R. D.

She looked at him with half-humorous scorn in her dark

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purple eyes. "When had he seen eyes like them lately? He was sure he had seen those eyes before, but where? His memory was surely not going to fail him?" He began to feel profound pity for himself, to feel that he had been hardly dealt with in having received such a bad blow on what would otherwise have been such an auspicious day in the annals of the Davis family.

"What time would you like to dine, Mr. Denham?" she asked, laying what he thought a most uncalled-for emphasis on his name.

"Eight, of course," he replied sharply, forgetting for the moment that he was not speaking to his hired cook. "I beg your pardon," he added hurriedly. "I should have said I would dine at eight o'clock if quite convenient to you."

"It will be as convenient as any other hour, Mr. Denham. I am new at the trade of 'landlady'—almost as inexperienced, I fancy, as you are at the profession of lodger——"

"What do you mean?" he interrupted nervously. Was he to be harassed still further by this odd-looking woman's innuendoes and suspicions?

"I only meant—what I said," she laughed. "Will you tell me what I am to get for your dinner?"

He was abstracted again, and in his abstraction he muttered:

"Oh, just a simple dinner, clear soup, a little fish, and a couple of *entrées*. You know I don't care for a joint—I mean a—well—I had better leave the catering entirely to you, Mrs. Greg."

She busied herself about the room for a few minutes, making all things that she touched look more graceful from the contact of her fingers. It fidgeted him into a state of fury nearly, to see her moving about in that soft, noiseless way, when he wanted to be alone in order to think! He was feeling unaccountably tired, faint, and weary! What

an awful thing it would be if he were to have an illness there, become irresponsible, delirious perhaps! A doctor, a local doctor who might recognize him, would be sent for, and then!

The bare supposition of such a possibility made him shiver.

"I am not feeling well," he murmured; "I know how to treat myself. Don't be alarmed if I surrender to weakness and stay in bed for a few days. Don't send for a doctor unless I specially desire you to do so."

There was a beseeching tone in his voice that drove all the mocking humor out of her eyes.

"Poor man!" she said, coming up suddenly to him and holding out her hand heartily. "Don't fear to trust me. *I*, too, have had to pay the penalty that we must all pay sooner or later, when we are found out in a sin that outrages the world. I am sorry for you. You may rest assured that you are safe in my house."

"What do you mean?" he stammered, trying to look dignified, and failing signally in the attempt.

"I mean that I have been too unhappy myself ever to add knowingly to the unhappiness of a fellow-creature, Mr. Denham. If you wish to stay quiet and unseen in my house for some reason you don't like to confide to me, quiet and unseen you shall be. No one comes here but the tradesmen's boys."

"Are you a widow?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I am a wife whose husband is rarely at home."

"Away on business or pleasure?"

Her face flushed at the tone more than the words of his inquiry.

"Perhaps a mixture of both," she said scornfully. "I make him as happy as I can when he comes home, and, as questions bore him, I never ask him any."

"A jealous and not too happy woman," he thought pityingly. "Thank God, Anna has never had to doubt or reproach *me* on that score." For a few moments he felt vastly superior to the unknown Mr. Greg, and warmly disposed to be a sympathetic friend to the probably neglected wife.

"Bless you for promising to save me from all unauthorized intrusion," he said emotionally. Then, to his infinite relief, she went out of the room, and he flung himself on the sofa to try and get some rest for his weary body and soul.

While he rested and waited for his dinner she went back to the little kitchen, that glowed and was brilliant with a goodly array of highly polished copper utensils, and took counsel with her servant about the new lodger's simple little repast.

"Go and do this marketing at once, Ellen," she said, "and when you come back I must come and help you to cook. I shall get into his ways after a day or two, and then the late dinner will go like clockwork."

"But master's come home this evening, hasn't he, ma'am?" Ellen asked. "Trust me to cook the dinner. Mr. Greg can never bear you out of his sight when he is at home."

Mrs. Greg smiled faintly. "His sense of expediency will make him spare me to-night, Ellen. We are not rich people; we must try to please and keep a lodger who is willing to pay liberally."

"I suppose master has a good deal of money, as he's able to be visiting so much," Ellen said tentatively, but her mistress only replied with a cool look that checked the girl's curiosity.

"The sooner you start on your errands, the sooner Mr. Greg's dinner will be set going," she said quietly. Then she went back to her own little sanctum, where a fine, well-set-up, soldierlike man lounged back in the one armchair, *smoking* and reading a newspaper.

A look of irrepressible love and pride overspread her face as she advanced toward him, and placing one hand on his shoulder, bent down and pressed her lips to the cheek he indolently offered to her caress.

"I heard you come in, Ted, dear, but I couldn't come to you at once. I was interviewing my new lodger."

"Man or woman?" he asked curtly.

"An elderly man, says he's an American, and wishes to live here as much in seclusion as possible."

Mr. Greg laughed. "Wants to be a dark horse, eh? Well, we'll humor his fancy if he pays us for it. Why do you wear black, Marian, when you know how I hate it?"

"Black is my only wear, because it's the cheapest," she said, trying to speak cheerfully.

He made an impatient movement. "Money! money! you always throw the want of money at my head as soon as I come home. Have you got anything in the house to give me? I've had no luncheon to-day."

"Shall I get you a chop, Ted?"

"If you've nothing better to give me," he said crossly.

CHAPTER XIII.

BOUND FOR TRELYN.

THE time of roses was long past. A glorious autumn had followed a lovely summer, and winter was behaving itself properly with regard to snow, sharp frosts, and excellent skating. Young men of light and leading were driving tandem over the Serpentine, and an ox had been roasted whole on the Thames. Christmas was upon us—Christmas with all its holy, pure associations, created by God; and also with many that are neither pure nor holy, created by man. But still, in spite of this latter fact, a time for the renewal of

many a broken tie, and of a general gathering together of families and friends.

To begin with the least important of the players who are strutting on the little stage before us.

Mrs. Robert Davis and her children had found an asylum in a pretty old thatched house belonging to Sir Walter St. Austle, and standing midway between Trelyn Towers and a little country town. Here they lived on a small income; the children in blissful ignorance of their sadly pauperized and worse than fatherless condition, the wife in a perfectly unauthorized state of equally blissful certainty of "hearing from poor Robert very soon, and of being able to hold up her head with the highest again."

Meantime "poor Robert" was still leading the life of a well stalled and fed ox in the sequestered nook in Norwood which he had chosen as his hiding place, and having the satisfaction the while of seeing that he was being much sought for in America, Australia, Monte Carlo, various parts of India, and even in "far Japan."

Sir Walter and Lady St. Austle had settled down at Trelyn Towers immediately after their marriage, and Laura had borne the blow of finding that she did not bring a penny to her husband, but, on the other hand, owed a considerable amount of money which he had to pay, with exquisite equanimity. On the other hand, it must be conceded that she bore with equal equanimity the sad story of his losses on the turf and in his training stables.

The pain of living on a small income in a large place never seemed to affect Laura at all, while to her husband it was gall and bitterness. She was very happy in her beautiful home, and never felt a pang at not being able to fill it with guests. She was always well served and waited upon, therefore the cutting down of the establishment which Sir Walter found necessary did not affect her. Both her health and her temper were perfect, in fact, and the only trouble

she had in life was the thought that sometimes crossed her mind that "poor Robert, who had always been so good to her," might be wanting something. When this thought arose she would cry for a few minutes, and then go and give some presents to his children, or ask his wife to stay for a day or two at Trelyn, during which time she would heap every kindness and attention she could upon that forlorn and faithful woman, and perhaps feel a little hurt at Anna's so palpably taking for granted all that was done for her, and obviously expecting more.

But these were the only crumples in Laura's rose-leaf, and in the midst of many a monetary trouble that beset him about this period, Sir Walter found her so soothing that he would have done the deed of "marrying her again, even had he known her to be penniless when he did so."

Can the magnificent generosity of man go beyond such a declaration as this—especially when he is hard up himself?

Mrs. Poynter and Ella were still "so near" in their pretty house in Kensington, and still as far as the poles asunder in affection and sympathy, as at the time of Laura Davis' marriage. Guy St. Austle had gone out to Australia with his new play, which had been so judiciously boomed that he was expected home shortly with his pockets full of money. And when he came Mrs. Poynter knew that she would have to decide at once and forever as to his future and her own.

The loss of him during all these months, after having been so closely and sweetly intimate with him for so many weeks, had taught her a truth. He was so much to her; her longing for him, for his companionship, for his advice, for his opinions, for his sympathy, for *himself*, was so intense that she knew she could never live the best that was in life without him.

"If Ella would only marry and relieve me of the responsibility I feel about her, I would lay aside all my morbid

fears and make Guy and myself happy," she often thought. But then a shadow thrown by the mere thought of Ella would darken her mind and judgment, and she would turn aside from the contemplation of her own possible happiness, and wistfully consider how best she could fulfill her responsibilities toward the girl who had neither father nor mother to turn to, and who was always ready to develop wasp-like qualities toward the one to whose charge she had been consigned, and on whom she was utterly dependent.

It was not a case of "no one coming to marry, no one coming to woo" that left Ella in maiden meditation still. An excellent opportunity of settling herself down in comfort as the wife of a rising young Kensington doctor was open to her. But the girl was not fancy-free. Her fancy had been caught by Guy St. Austle. Her heart had followed her fancy, as does sometimes happen even with the most frivolous of her sex. And now it had come to this, that she would stop at nothing short of a crime to detach him from her stepmother and win him to herself. Accordingly, it may easily be conceived that she was looking forward to his return with quite as much impatient anxiety as Mabel Poynter herself was experiencing. This impatient anxiety the girl had to conceal, as she lived in dread of Mrs. Poynter's discovering and thwarting it. Ella no longer proclaimed the admiration she felt for Guy St. Austle by planting miniatures of him, painted by herself, about the house in every direction. But her stepmother had a shrewd suspicion that one lurked in Ella's pocket, while another kept guard over her girlish slumbers every night.

That these two women were desperately jealous of one another about Mr. St. Austle was an indisputable fact, and though one had a right to feel the humiliating passion on his account, while the other had not the faintest shadow of one to plead in justification of her folly, they suffered from it to the same extent.

Mrs. Poynter had the right, for Guy had told her how well he loved her a hundred times, and a hundred times had pleaded for her love in return. Whereas to Ella he had never shown any feeling stronger than that demanded by courtesy toward the most casual acquaintance. But the girl had taken an interest in him just out of revengeful, suspicious hatred. This had turned to hungry, jealous love when she had discovered that her suspicions and her revenge were alike uncalled for. It stung her to distraction when she recalled looks which she had seen him give, and words which she had heard him speak, to her stepmother! "Would she (Ella) ever win similar ones from him?" she asked herself restlessly a thousand times in the course of the week that was to bring him back to England. That she would have a chance of testing her powers in his direction soon she knew. For Mrs. Poynter and herself were invited down to spend a fortnight at Trelyn in January, and "Guy would be there," Lady St. Austle had said in her letter. In the freedom of country house life she would have opportunities of being with him that would be denied to her older stepmother. Ella gloated over those years which Mrs. Poynter possessed in addition to those owned by Ella herself. It galled her horribly to have to admit to herself that her stepmother's figure and points compared favorably with her own. It annoyed the girl greatly to see that the simplest style of dress looked more incongruously youthful on Mrs. Poynter's graceful form than if she had been eighteen.

"But she must go to pieces soon," Miss Poynter tried to console herself by thinking; "in two or three years she'll have to say good-by to the thirties, and then she'll stoop, or get broad and look quite matronly and uninteresting, while he will look young and handsome as ever. Besides, it's *awful* that he should be tricked into taking another man's leavings. Oh, how *could* poor dear papa forgive the

creature and leave his money to her, after once having found her out?"

So the apparently guileless young girl plotted and planned the downfall and disgrace of a woman who had never been anything but kind to her. And with that criminating letter which she had found among her father's private papers safely locked up in her dressing case, Miss Poynter went down with the unsuspecting Mabel to stay at Trelyn Towers and meet Guy St. Austle.

Preparations for paying a visit to the same place at the same time were simultaneously being made in the pretty little Norwood cottage in which Robert Davis, under the name of Denham, had taken sanctuary.

"I've met an old chum, a fellow I knew at Harrow—St. Austle, a Cornish baronet, with a lot of dollars," Ted Greg told his wife excitedly one day, coming into the still, subdued life of the little cottage like a strong northerly wind sweeping all before it.

He had been away from home about a fortnight, staying with some relations in the North—relations who were glad to have him in the hunting season because he was a first-rate man after the hounds, and showed off their hunters (at two hundred guineas apiece) in a way they were unequal to, themselves. They found he organized their big shoots admirably also, for he was as good with a gun as with a horse. And as he had pulled the biggest salmon out of the river that ran through their grounds which had ever been landed in the district, he and his rod were always welcome during the open season. But his wife had never been asked to accompany him.

It was the old, old story. She had loved him not wisely but too well, and when she had lost her husband, home, position, honor, means of subsistence, and reputation for his sake, he had acted "honorably," all his friends said, in

marrying her. The truth being that he performed this honorable act because he had got into the habit of being adored by her, and knew that no other woman would wait upon him so untiringly, unselfishly, and well.

From the very first he had never permitted the marriage tie to weigh heavily upon him. Fashionable people, his own relations even—people who were intensely moral, to all outward appearances—forgave handsome, swaggering Ted Greg his share in the found-out sin very quickly, but they did not extend their leniency to his wife. They ignored her as something quite outside their virtuous ken, and fell into the way of speaking of "poor Ted," as if she were the only offender in the case.

She accepted her position as a proud woman—who had been pure as an angel until her overwhelming love for this one man caused her to trip—is sure to accept it. That is to say, she bore every slight unflinchingly, never showing the pain she felt, never reproaching him, but just patiently sinking into obscurity, and devoting all her energies to serving him.

It never occurred to him to think that she had made a huge sacrifice for him. He thought lightly of women; his previous experiences had been among the loosest of their sex, and when poor Marian Poynter bowed her pride and periled her soul for his sake, he took it quite in the order of things and never suspected that she suffered martyrdom for her frailty.

"St. Austle has asked me to go down to his place in Cornwall for a fortnight; he can give me very good snipe-shooting, and mount me, if the frost doesn't stop the hunting," Mr. Greg went on cheerfully.

"Dear Ted, I must——" She hesitated and then finished her sentence in a way she had not intended doing when she began it: "What day do you go?"

"On the 10th. By the way, you must get me some new

stockings; I'm tired of the black and gray. Get them fawn-colored ground with darker brown diamonds on them. I ought to have some new white shirts. Those infernal laundresses at Laxby fagged the cuffs and fronts frightfully."

"Can you give me any money, Ted?"

"What a woman you are! Why didn't you ask me for it before? I'm cleared out; at least I must keep enough to take me down to Trelyn and tip the gamekeepers and grooms. What do you do with the money that old fossil pays you for the rooms?"

"Pay the rent and live on it," she said quietly.

He knitted his brows thoughtfully for a few moments, then his countenance cleared up wonderfully as he suggested:

"Why not let another bed and sitting rooms, at two guineas a week? You'd be in clover then."

"This is the only other sitting room."

"Well, I'm rarely at home, and you don't use it much, I suppose; you seem to me to spend most of your time doing the slavey's work in the kitchen."

"I only do that when you are at home, because you won't eat what she cooks," she said gently, whereupon he got angry, and said she, "Was always trying to make him out to be a selfish and unreasonable brute."

"Ted, dear Ted, don't say that," she gasped, going over and bending down to kiss the handsome face, which still had the power to make her thrill through every fiber of her being when it beamed affectionately upon her. She had been his wife for fifteen years, and still he was her hero! No other man had ever stirred the pulses or touched the warm heart of Marian Greg but this careless, debonair, selfish, attractive, unworthy husband of hers.

He permitted her to caress him, and even took the trouble to put his arm round her waist and draw her down to his

knee. But he was not thinking of her even while he did these things; she felt sure of that. His mind had reverted to the visit he was going to pay to his old friend Sir Walter St. Austle, and to a casual consideration of the means of getting the things it would be needful for him to take with him. He always dressed well, and was fastidious about the look of his luggage, traveling rugs, and toilet appointments. Not in a fussy, feminine way, but in a broad, masculine manner that proclaimed expense was no object.

In various ways Mr. Greg made a lot of money, but he always spent a little more than he made. The false step he had taken in his youth of not only coveting, but taking away his neighbor's wife, was an irretrievable one, and had spoiled his career to a great extent. Still he always managed to keep his head above water and to make a fair appearance, and none of his fine friends had an idea that his wife led a joyless, colorless, hard-working life at home. Even had they suspected this truth the majority of them would have said, "Oh, well, what can a woman expect who marries such a devil-may-care chap as Ted Greg? No woman with a grain of sense could ever have expected him to settle down to domestic felicity in a quiet way."

It may be told here that his wife had long ceased to entertain any such unreasonable expectation. But she loved him just as blindly, passionately, and pardoningly as she had done when she gave up the world for love.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THIN ICE.

THE play which Guy St. Austle had produced first in Australia achieved such a distinguished success—made in the slang of the day "such a big boom"—that he had no

difficulty in getting the manager of The Comet to accept and promise to produce it without delay, as soon as he returned to England. It was put into rehearsal even before he went down to Trelyn. If it had not been for the joyful certainty he had that Mabel Poynter would be a fellow-guest with him at his brother's place, he would have found it impossible to tear himself away from the fascination of daily witnessing the efforts of an intelligent company to get inside his characters. As it was, he felt he might with safety leave them to the direction of the stage manager for a fortnight, while he tackled the far more difficult task of getting inside Mrs. Poynter's character and discovering what her real motive was for holding him at arm's length.

He never doubted or mistrusted her love for him. A man never does when a woman has once shown that he, and he only, has stirred her heart to its depths. But he did mistrust her judgment about him. He thought that she had taken alarm at the wild, very much variegated life he had been compelled by circumstances to lead. He knew that women very often do entertain the notion that, unless a man is married, he must of necessity get into a love scrape in every outlandish corner of the world in which he may be thrust by fate. Without being what men term a saint, Guy St. Austle was a remarkably clean-handed man, and it hurt him to think that Mrs. Poynter might be suspicious of him. In thinking that she was this, he himself was guilty of injustice, for Mrs. Poynter believed too firmly in the power of her own ascendency over him to imagine for a moment that he had ever been tricked into error by love for any other woman.

Mrs. Poynter and her stepdaughter went down to Trelyn on the same day, but not by the same train, as Guy. She and Ella started at nine o'clock from Paddington, whereas he waited to see at two o'clock a rehearsal of his play, and

traveled by the night train. If she had been alone, the rehearsal would not have been benefited by his presence and instructions. But the fact of Ella being with her made him resign the privilege of ministering to Mabel's wants on the long, tedious journey.

Once or twice during his absence in Australia, he had received gentle reminders of this girl's existence. Once she had sent him, merely with her compliments, several press-cuttings containing notices of his latest novel. At another time she had tried to tickle his vanity by sending him a delicately painted miniature of himself, with the words "painted from memory" written in a scroll formed of forget-me-nots on the back. To these attentions he had responded promptly but not warmly, for he began to fear that he might be subjected to a series of them when he returned to England, and to be continually called upon to recognize them would take up too much time. He tried to keep the idea at bay that Ella was honoring him with a warmer feeling than he desired to win from her. At the same time he remembered that she had become watchful and jealous of Mrs. Poynter before he went to Australia, and the receipt of the press notices and the likeness of himself showed that she had not forgotten him by any means.

Before they had been at Trelyn two days he found himself very much harassed by the continual little onslaughts the girl made upon him. She was perpetually wanting his opinion about a picture or a poem or a new novel, and she would always seek for this opinion when he was alone.

The frost continued sternly, there was no hunting, and the whole party spent most of their time on the ice, some skating, and others, who were not proficient in that graceful art, being pushed about comfortably in chairs. Mrs. Poynter belonged to this latter class, and Guy St. Austle devoted himself to her service, until Ella hinted that he had given

her to understand that "he found it a great bore to be kept dancing attendance on people who had no business on the ice unless they could skate and look after themselves."

When she heard that, poor Mabel froze up nearly as hard as the surface of the lake itself, and would have no more of his help, humbly as he proffered it. While Ella, finding the first sowing of malicious seed bore fruit so speedily, threw about a handful or two more broadcast.

"I hope when I'm quite old—as old as Mrs. Poynter—that I shall not be silly and vain and anxious to attract attention," she said, one morning when she had followed Guy into the billiard room and prettily expressed surprise at finding him there.

"What makes you breathe such a worthy but unnecessary aspiration?" he asked.

"Because I can't help seeing that Mrs. Poynter is as eager for the fray as if she had not married and had lovers years ago," Ella replied, lifting lovely, appealing eyes to his, but speaking with cool hardihood.

"Mrs. Poynter commands attention, she never need be anxious to attract it," he said coldly.

"You admire her so much, do you?" Ella questioned. "Well," she went on spitefully, "I can only tell you that I heard Sir Walter telling her at breakfast this morning before *you* came down, lazy man! that his old chum, 'handsome Ted Greg, was coming here to stay,' and she colored up like a girl, and then she asked, 'Is he married? Is his wife coming with him?' Now, how can it possibly concern her whether he's married or not, unless, hearing him called handsome Ted Greg, she wants to get up a flirtation with him?"

Ella brought her argument to a close triumphantly, but Guy looked inexpressibly disgusted.

"*Mrs. Poynter* is as incapable of 'flirting' as she is of

doing anything else vulgar or underhand," he said shortly. And Ella laughed scornfully as she replied :

"You think so? How I *hate* to see you taken in by her cool, stand-off ways. They're only put on to make you more eager. 'Incapable of flirting or anything else mean or underhand,' is she? Shall I show you a letter that will prove conclusively even to you that she is capable of all the things you mention? Ah! and of worse things, too!"

The girl shivered with the force of her own bitter animus. She tried to think that it was loyalty to her dead father, which made her pant to unmask the pretender to a seat on Honor's throne, but all the while she knew that she would have let her purpose slip had it not been for the fierce desire that filled her to detach Guy from Mrs. Poynter and annex him to herself.

"Show me a letter that is not addressed to myself! and that you think would be calculated to lower my esteem for as perfect a woman as the world holds! No, thank you, Miss Poynter."

"Your 'perfect woman' broke my father's heart. If he hadn't been as nearly 'perfect' as a man can be, she would have been disgraced. As it was, he forgave her and trusted her again, and now she is taking you in. It makes me half mad to see such cunning on one side and such credulity on the other."

The girl spoke with rapidity and concentrated force. Her words cut him like a sharp two-edged sword, but he did not credit them for a moment. Ella's first open attempt to deface the character of the woman he loved was a failure. But Ella had not only passion on her side, she had perseverance and pertinacity also. She had a love as well as a hate to gratify, and for the gratification of one or other of these passions she felt that her strength would be as the strength of ten when obstacles arose in her path.

For the present she was baffled by Guy's composure. All he said, when she had finished her tirade, was:

"How awfully mistaken you must be! Are you coming down to the lake? I promised to meet Laura and Mrs. Poynter there at twelve."

Ella was clever enough to accept a temporary defeat without making any futile bluster about it. She banished all traces of angry excitement from her face, agreed cheerfully to go down to the lake with him, and after a few minutes' absence reappeared in a short crimson skating dress liberally trimmed with fur, in which she looked like a gorgeous little foreign bird.

She diplomatically avoided making any reference to the subject of their late discussion as they walked briskly down to the lake. But a slight thrill of exultation passed over her her as she advanced into the little crowd assembled on the bank with Guy by her side, and Lady St. Austle said laughingly:

"Have you been keeping Guy, or has Guy been keeping you? There have been a thousand inquiries after you both. Walter told me to tell you, Guy, that he relies on you to-day to see that all the ladders and ropes are in good working order, as he can't be here; and he made me vow I wouldn't go on unless you could look after me. I told him it was rather a shame to tie you to your sister, when there are so many pretty girls to look after."

Her hand was tucked under Mrs. Poynter's arm, and Laura felt that arm twitch as she spoke of the pretty girls.

"The darling!" Lady St. Austle thought remorsefully, for she was very loyal to this new friend of hers, Guy's *real* love. "She needn't have a pang about one of the girls, there's not one to whom she mightn't give points, and beat them by her charm, Walter says. But that stepdaughter knows how to flatter men, and Guy is only a man."

"Let me run you round on a chair," Guy was saying at the same time to Mrs. Poynter.

"No, I mean to be a spectator, only, to-day. You must look after Lady St. Austle and Ella."

"To-morrow that Admirable Crichton, Mr. Greg, will be here to divide the labor with you, Guy," Lady St. Austle put in cheerfully. Involuntarily, as the name was mentioned, Guy glanced at Mrs. Poynter and saw that her face had grown chalky white. In another moment, becoming conscious that Ella's eyes were fixed upon her as well, she flushed painfully and turned to walk away.

"What on earth could it all mean? Unmistakably Mabel was agitated at the mention of this man Greg's name. Could it be possible that the proud, pure, perfect Mabel could have been indiscreet?" These thoughts would force themselves into Guy's mind, but he dismissed them peremptorily; and without trusting himself to meet Ella's eyes, in which he felt tolerably sure an expression of mocking triumph would be lurking, he knelt down to fasten on that young lady's skates.

It has been already said that Mr. St. Austle had no tender feeling whatever for the pretty little girl who was doing her utmost to excite one in him, and artlessly showing her cards the while. But he was not blind to her attractions. Her lustrous eyes—purple lakes of soul-sentiment, intense feeling, and slumbering passion—were eyes that not one man in a hundred could look into and remain utterly unmoved. Guy was not the man in the hundred. Nor was he blind to the beauty of the small slim feet, to which he was affixing the skates.

"They look too slender to support even such a feather-weight as you are," he said, when he had finished his task, and Ella looked at them complacently as she replied:

"My feet and hands are an inheritance from my mother, I've been told. She was a great beauty, and a finer, taller

woman than I am ; but my old nurse used to tell me that I had my mother's hands and feet and eyes and hair."

"Have you a likeness of her?" Guy asked. He was involuntarily interested in this unknown woman, of whom her daughter spoke with rapturous fervor, though she could not remember her.

She had got on the ice now, and going round in an intricate figure that displayed her skill and the perfect control she had over her flying feet admirably. As he spoke she checked her graceful progress abruptly, and held her hand out to him for support.

"No, I have no portrait of her. I wonder papa hadn't one taken, for he adored her so. But you see she must have died before he had time to think of everything, for I was only four or five when she 'passed away from us,' as nurse used to call it."

She was in the midst of her explanation, clinging to his hand, and looking up into his face with pretty, pathetic interest, when Mrs. Poynter came up and stood close to them on the bank. She heard Ella's last sentence and knew at once of whom she was speaking.

"Poor girl! may she never know the truth," Mrs. Poynter thought pityingly. "Oh, that that man were not coming! A careless word from him may batter down the wall of secrecy that has been so carefully built up round Ella all her life, and reveal a truth that will crush her to the ground. What a goose I am, though, to speak as if it were impossible there should be more than one handsome Ted Greg in the world!"

Mabel looked so mournful, as these anxious, tender thoughts chased one another through her mind, that Ella said in her heart:

"She is beginning to see that the man she has made so sure of has eyes for other people after all. How I *wish* he would let me show him that letter."

Presently she skimmed away, followed by a string of the youth of the neighborhood, for all the families in the region round availed themselves of the frozen lake, and of the open house and hospitality which was the order of the day at Trelyn. A number of men came down daily from the Plymouth garrison also, so the gathering was a large and lively one, and the noise they were making drowned the sound of an ominous cracking, which only some of those who were standing on the bank heard.

These latter raised an alarm immediately, but Ella did not see clearly the precise direction in which the onlookers were endeavoring to indicate the danger was. She struck for the bank at the nearest point, but before she reached it the ice cracked, broke asunder, and the girl went down, feet foremost, luckily, into at least twelve feet of water.

There arose a shout, almost a roar of horror, and fifty voices were raised in giving fifty orders, which no one thought of obeying. In the midst of the turmoil Guy kept his head, and, with the help of another man, ran a ladder from the bank across the chasm to the firm ice beyond. Ella's head appeared simultaneously, and, exhausted as she was, she managed to cling on to the jagged edge of the ice until the ladder was gently shifted to within her reach. By its aid she managed to drag her poor, perishing, fainting, drenched little form to within Guy St. Austle's grasp, and as he clutched her closely to him, she felt that she was having her reward for being half drowned and nearly frightened to death.

"If you *could* run to the house it would be better for you," he whispered; but she shook her head, and her pale lips murmured a faint negative to the proposal.

"She can't stand," he explained to the bystanders, "so I must run home with her as fast as I can. One of you fellows run on and order a hot bath and blankets to be ready when we get there."

Half a dozen fellows were off at once in the service of the pretty little icy maiden, beneath whose frozen breast a hot little heart was beating with passionate pleasure at finding Guy's arms clasped so closely round her. His burden was not a heavy one by any means; still, at the pace he was going, it was not expedient for him to waste any of his breath in words. Accordingly, when Ella, with her arms round his neck and her cheek touching his, whispered: "You've saved my life! how I shall always love you for it!" the only reply he made was only to incline his head a little nearer to hers and give her a sympathetic hug.

Mrs. Poynter was at the Towers almost as soon as Guy and his charge, and Ella, after being duly parboiled, dosed with hot negus, and laid in a warm bed, speedily recovered her circulation and spirits. The only temporary inconvenience she felt, in fact, was that her stepmother insisted on sitting by her in order to minister to any of her possible wants. This disturbed the easy flow of those lovely memories she was having of that blissful time she had passed in Guy's arms, with her cheek resting against his. She had been weak and faint, draggled and weary, her body had been one mass of pain and aches from the cold; but for all that, the time had been the most blissful one of her life. She would never forget it. Would he remember it as vividly, she wondered, when next they met?

The following day she heard that Mr. Greg—handsome Ted Greg—had arrived in time to join them at breakfast; "and," Lady St. Austle added, "he was most sincerely cut up when he heard what a narrow escape you had. He looked absolutely stunned for a moment, didn't he, Mrs. Poynter?"

"I didn't look at him," Mrs. Poynter said coldly—ungraciously, Ella thought.

CHAPTER XV.

"I WAS AN ASS."

HANDSOME Ted Greg very rarely troubled himself about anyone or anything, unless he, or his interests, were likely to be affected by one or the other. But when he heard that a widowed Mrs. Poynter and her stepdaughter Ella were his fellow-guests, and that the girl had narrowly escaped drowning on the previous day, he betrayed a good deal of inexplicable and genuine emotion. Even when he recovered himself, he seemed abstracted and almost gloomy, recalling his attention with an effort and a start when he was addressed, and being apparently in a state of indecision and perplexity.

Guy had seen the first meeting between Mabel Poynter and the new arrival. The lady had bowed very coolly when Mr. Greg had been introduced to her, but had certainly shown no sign of recognition of him, and it was equally evident that the lady was absolutely unknown to the man. Still, her name obviously was known to him, and when he was told of Ella's accident his face grew livid.

In vain Guy conjectured and hunted about for a reason for this consciousness. He could find none, he could think of none, and he shrank from asking Mabel to help him to unravel the mystery. After all, it was no business of his ; Mabel was the only person with whom he had to concern himself, and it was clear that, personally, Mr Greg and Mabel were strangers to each other.

Moodily and meditatively, for an hour after breakfast that day, Ted Greg sat before the writing table in his bedroom, a pen in his hand and a cigarette in his mouth, trying to determine whether or not he should write and tell his wife that *Mrs. Poynter* and her stepchild, Ella, were

staying in the same house with him. He very rarely did write to Mrs. Greg when he was away from her, not even when he was staying with people who were well aware of there being a Mrs. Greg at home. This negligence, concerning one of the primary duties of an absent spouse, arose not from want of love for or indifference about her, but out of a rooted distaste for the art of writing, and an equal distaste to making Mrs. Greg, who had not been invited to accompany him, subject matter for the gossip of the servants who took the letters to the post. He did not resent her being ignored by the old friends and acquaintances who held out the hearty hand of welcome to him still. But he did shrink angrily from the idea of her being canvassed by those whom he was in the habit of describing colloquially as "their beastly flunkeys and slaveys."

There had been no necessity for mentioning Marian, or for alluding to the fact of his being married at all, when he had accidentally met Sir Walter St. Austle, and been given the invitation to Trelyn Towers. There would be a certain amount of awkwardness in bringing this unknown wife of his upon the *tapis* now. He loved her dearly when she was near him to be loved. But when he was away from her he shrank from doing anything that might cause either her or himself to be canvassed and conjectured about. So now, as the St. Austles knew nothing whatever about her, and did not suspect the existence of a wife in the background, he resolved not to write to her from Trelyn, and just to let matters take their course with regard to the Poynters.

Whenever he flung aside a half-framed determination to do anything, and settled to let things take their course, he relapsed into his normal state of "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," and never troubled himself about any contingency or consequence that was not immediately under his nose. Accordingly, now, with the burnt-out end

of his sixth cigarette, he cast aside all care or consideration for anything outside the pleasure of the hour.

To the delight of every light-hearted man and woman the frost had broken up, and the Scorrier hounds were to meet on the first open day at Trelyn. With such a prospect before him, it was clearly Ted's first duty to get hold of St. Austle and inspect the stables.

"I hope none of these women hunt," he thought, ungallantly but honestly. "Unless they can take care of themselves, they're a cursed nuisance in the field. Besides, I hate giving a woman a lead in a strange country, and one of them's safe to want me to do it if they're a hunting lot."

He was not misled by his vanity in saying this. Handsome, debonair Ted Greg was as much bothered and beguiled by women in all directions now, as he had been twenty years ago, when he committed the fatal folly of his life. Even sensible, prudent women of thirty, and perhaps a few years over, in ignorance of the existence of that handsome, patient, hard-working wife of his at home, had frequently shown willingness to bestow themselves, and casually their comfortable incomes, on the light-hearted fellow who had neither a regular profession, ascertained means, nor—so it seemed—a local habitation. In fact, he was a universal favorite with women, for no better reason than that he was always light-hearted, flatteringly ready to be at their beck and call, manly, a proficient in every kind of sport, and last, though not least, as fine and good-looking a specimen of manhood as existed in the United Kingdom.

The self-contained woman who lived in the secluded little cottage at Norwood, letting lodgings in order to be "no drag on poor Ted," and in order that he might have a place to go to when there were no good sporting country quarters open to him, had hard work at times to possess her

soul in patience when she pictured him surrounded by attractive women. What chance had she, she would ask herself, in her plain dresses and house-care-worn air against these smart society dames and demoiselles, with their minds at peace and hearts at ease? His frank references to some of them, and his outspoken admiration for them, did not deceive her a bit. She knew that men can speak frankly and avow open admiration without turning a hair, even when far deeper feelings are in question than liking and admiration. She did not know that he habitually posed as a bachelor when he was away from her, but she surmised that she was never on the *tapis*. Accordingly, jealousy claimed her for its tormenting own perpetually, and the fact of her not being able to put her finger on any individual object did not make its pangs a bit the easier to bear.

Before he had been twenty-four hours at Trelyn, Ted Greg had thrown off and forgotten that he had experienced any feeling of embarrassment about the Poynters.

Ella came down the day after her accident, looking very pale and pretty, and rather inclined to appreciate Mr. St. Austle more than she had ever done. She saw that he closely watched both herself and Ted Greg when the latter was introduced to her, and she attributed this display of interest to a jealous dislike on Guy's part to seeing another man approach her. But neither Ted Greg's appearance nor Ted Greg's name held any personal interest for the girl. She greeted her new acquaintance with such absolute unconcern that Guy felt sure it was not on her step-daughter's account that Mabel had shown emotion on first hearing of and meeting this new figure on the canvas.

That Mr. Greg would quickly ingratiate himself with the whole party had been a foregone conclusion in Sir Walter's mind, when he gave the invitation to his old chum. But he had not been prepared to see Ted concentrate most of the attention of the whole party on himself, and become

the pivot on which the principal arrangements of the day turned. The baronet had an airy way of his own, which was apt to lead people whithersoever he willed. But this was quite blown aside by Ted's stronger airiness, which held as great a charm for Walter as for the others.

Even Laura, happy, contented, and placidly proud as she was of her husband and her position, soon began to declare that the hunting days were too dull for endurance, and that the house was not like itself without Mr. Greg; while Mrs. Poynter cultivated him assiduously, and led him on to make innumerable small confidences to her about many things that were vital to him, such as likely colts that were being kept, and syndicates for the purchase of shares in divers railways, that were bound to pay a hundred and fifty per cent. within a couple of months at the latest. But confidential as he waxed on these matters—irritatingly confidential he seemed to Guy St. Austle—he never lifted the curtain that concealed his home or domestic life. This was Tom Tiddler's ground, and though Mabel skirmished round it, she had never ventured to put her foot upon it. Nevertheless, her determination to find out whether or not this man had a wife, either in the past or present, remained unaltered.

The deserted wife and children of Robert Davis, once millionaire and still missing man, were always very much to the fore at Trelyn Towers. They lived in one of the prettiest houses on St. Austle's property. They paid no rent, they were free of the Trelyn dairy, garden produce, poultry-yard, and indeed of everything else that belonged to Sir Walter St. Austle.

In one direction the latter had retrenched enormously since his marriage. He had put down his training and breeding establishments, sold his horses, and forsworn all the seductive joys of the turf. But in spite of his own impecuniosity and Laura's plain, unvarnished pennilessness,

he had refused to curtail or economize at Trelyn. In the stronghold of his old race he would still play the open-handed part which had been handed to him intact through a long line of forbears. He was made of the material that can face utter ruin, but not mediocre meannesses. In giving up the turf he had made his grand sacrifice, and after that he resolutely declined to do any more pinching and screwing. While the St. Austles lived at Trelyn, they would always live like St. Austles. So when Laura told him that she "hated to see poor Anna, who had always had plenty of horses and carriages at her disposal, without even a pony-trap now," Sir Walter applauded his wife for the kindly thought, and presented Mrs. Davis with the prettiest little waggonette Bodmin could build, and the handsomest little upstanding cob that a well-known Cornish breeder could breed.

In his careless, forgetful way, Ted Greg had forgotten to associate Lady St. Austle with Robert Davis, the missing forger and bankrupt. Accordingly when, having been taken down to see Mrs. Davis, her pretty house, and new acquisitions, he asked: "Where does her husband hang out? or is she a widow?" Laura felt herself constrained to tell him the whole story, though she was very much pained to do it.

"Poor chap! and you've never heard of him since?" he said sympathetically. He was a sinner himself, this poor, too readily influenced Ted Greg, but he was very tolerant to the sins and faults and follies of others. He thought now far more of the suffering entailed upon Robert by his sin, than of the sin which had entailed the suffering. There was a very tender look in his eyes, as he referred to the erring man, and the erring man's sister liked him all the better for it.

"Awful ups and downs there are in the world!" he said *feelingly.* "The day your poor brother came to grief, a

man settled himself into lodgings in a house I know in Norwood, in a quiet kind of way. But he's a long-headed chap, and a lucky one into the bargain, and he's been awfully lucky in some speculations on the Stock Exchange, and has made a big pile, I fancy, from what he told me the other day. But he lives like a hermit in the midst of all his plenty."

"You live near him? you seem to know him well?" Mrs. Poynter asked. She was always on the alert to pick up any facts that might help to reveal Ted Greg to her.

"Did I say I knew him well?" he answered laughingly. "I mustn't sail under false colors, I only know him in the most casual way. We've smoked a few cigarettes together, and discussed the price of stocks two or three times, but I know no more of Denham than I did the first day I saw him. The fact is, he's a 'cute Yankee, and doesn't give himself away to the first beggar for information."

"Do you know Norwood well, Mr. Greg?" Lady St. Austle put in. "Do you know Rezare? Such a lovely place! I lived there with my poor brother till I married."

"Can't say I know Norwood well," he said slowly, to the measured cadence of the puffs at his cigarette. "I had a sickening dose of the Crystal Palace in my youth, so I keep out of eye-shot of it now as much as possible. But now and again I go down there and stay for a day or two."

"Then, perhaps, you can recommend me some lodgings?" Mrs. Poynter said quickly. "Where you stay sometimes, for instance. Would they suit me for a week or two?"

He faced her with good-tempered defiance in his eyes.

"They wouldn't suit you all," he said deliberately.

"Will you tell me where they are, and let me judge for myself?" she insisted, feeling that she was approaching Tom Tiddler's ground. "I should be a very easily pleased lodger, after a fastidious bachelor like you."

"I have never lodged in Norwood," he said cheerfully. "I stay there sometimes. The—friends with whom I stay have no lodgings to let, I assure you."

The upshot of this conversation was that Mr. Greg wrote to his wife at once, and one paragraph of his letter ran as follows:

"If anyone comes sniffing round, inquiring for lodgings before I come home, shut that person up, and say you have none to let. In fact, I feel that it's *infra dig.* altogether that you should be taking lodgers. Remember, you did it without consulting me in Denham's case; but I'll have no lady lodgers prying into your affairs and scenting out bygones that we both wish to bury."

"So there is a Mrs. Greg, ma'am," Mrs. Poynter's maid said that night when she was dressing her mistress for dinner. "Such a fine handsome gentleman, and so much after the ladies as he is! We none of us in the servants' hall thought of such a thing as his being married."

As a rule, Mrs. Poynter ruthlessly checked any little budding flowers of gossip from her maid, but now she felt too anxious to be dignified.

"How do you know there is a Mrs. Greg?" she asked.

"Mr. Greg came running down after the post-bag was locked, and gave a letter to James. I walked up to the post-office with James afterward, and I happened to see it was addressed to Mrs. Greg, Glen Cottage, Norwood."

"Probably his mother," Mrs. Poynter said chillingly. But at the same time she resolved to find out a little more about the antecedents and present pursuits of the fascinating Ted, for it shocked her to see that a strong friendship seemed to be growing up between him and Ella.

"If what I fear is true, he ought to shun her, poor child!" she thought. Then the remembrance of an oath which her husband had made her take, when he was dying, came

back upon her, and she was very uncomfortable, and very much inclined to confide all her troubles concerning Ted Greg to Guy. But the thought that, if she did so, the whole story would come out restrained her, for she feared Guy would not find that portion of it which related to herself pretty reading.

"I was an ass to write to Marian on St. Austle's note-paper," Ted Greg reflected, as soon as he had given his letter to James, "women are so d—d imprudent; she'll be writing to me here, and I shall get chaffed about my lady correspondent. Not that I want to keep her dark, the dear old girl, only, as I haven't mentioned that I have a wife, it will be awkward to do it now. If it does come out, won't that Meredith girl give me beans!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THAT MEREDITH GIRL.

One of the most constant frequenters of the lake when the frost was at its hardest, of the hunting field when the thaw set in, and of Trelyn Towers at all times, was a girl called May Meredith.

Under any circumstances she would have been an independent girl, both in spirit and action, but the conditions by which she had been surrounded from her cradle stage had fostered and developed this characteristic till it became abnormally out of proportion to her sex, some people said.

Well off, without being fabulously wealthy, fatherless and motherless from her childhood, and absolutely her own mistress from the day she was twenty-one, she was now, at twenty-five, uncontrolled and uncontrollable.

She never did anything that even the censorious could take hold of as a wrong thing. All her instincts were

generous and good, but they were rather of the broad, careless, masculine order than of the narrow, careful, feminine kind. She contended that at her age she was quite as competent to guide her own footsteps in the paths of honor and rectitude as any old, world-worn chaperon would be to guide them for her. Accordingly she lived at her pretty little place, Belhaven, on the banks of the Fal, with no other companion than her servants, horses, and dogs.

Without being a bit of a beauty she was a well-made girl of the stoutly built, middle-height type. Her eyes were real blue, and were set in a much bronzed round honest face. She rode and drove alone all over that part of the county, and on hunting-days she would often ask two or three men home to dine with her, thereby considerably scandalizing many women who did much worse. But she never lured any young man on to suppose she would marry him if he asked her, or beguiled any married man into even seeming to swerve from his allegiance to his wife.

To this girl Ted Greg had seemed a unique and superior being. His good looks attracted her as no other man's had ever done; they were so bold and manly, and he seemed so utterly unconscious of them. With her customary disregard of mere appearances, she showed her liking for him fearlessly. And he responded to it.

The St. Austles favored the intimacy, and agreed among themselves that "May might do much worse, and that it would be charming to have Ted Greg for a neighbor at Belhaven."

With uncalled-for discretion they said nothing of this hopeful plan of theirs to Mrs. Poynter, but Ella, who had become very intimate with Miss Meredith, was allowed to have an inkling of the truth, both from that young lady herself and from Lady St. Austle.

"I *do* like him better than any human being I ever saw *before.* I could bear to be ordered about by him, I believe,"

May admitted, and Lady St. Austle would say when May was not there :

"Ella, you must help me to give Mr. Greg chances with her. It would be such a good thing for him, poor fellow! for I'm sure he's not at all well off."

"I shouldn't care for a man twenty years older than myself, but as May Meredith seems to do it, I hope she'll get him." It was easy to breathe this hope, for Ella did not want him herself. Accordingly, she helped Lady St. Austle in a hundred ways to give Ted Greg "chances" of being alone with the independent young mistress of Belhaven.

He had begun by being attracted by the girl's hearty manner, love of horses, dogs, and sport, and a little, perhaps, by her obvious admiration for himself. She knew the country by heart, and was no trouble to him after the hounds, as she was better able to give him a lead, and show him the way, than he was to perform these offices for her. Then he got familiar with, and interested in her couple of hunters, her blue roan cob, and her yard full of hilarious, noisy dogs. It soon became his habit to saunter down to Belhaven whenever he was not hunting or shooting. He felt quite at home there. May had no dislike to the smell of tobacco, therefore she made no favor of letting him smoke in her drawing room. He inspected her horses with an eye like a hawk's, until the groom's life was a burden to him, and the horses' coats were in better condition than they had ever been before. He taught her dogs tricks and obedience, alternately commanding and caressing the intelligent beasts until they, one and all, abjectly worshiped him. And by the time he had done these things he found that May was very much in love with him, and that the hours spent with her were the pleasantest he had known since—the days of his youth and folly.

He had no moral courage, and so, when he found where

they were drifting, he resigned himself to what he called "the inevitable," and made no effort to check their progress down the stream. It would be all right, he told himself! In ten days, or a fortnight at the most, he would be going away; she wouldn't know his address, and as he wouldn't write to her, there would be an end to it! In the meantime—well, it is needless to go into details concerning what went on in the meantime.

There was that subtle, perfect understanding between them, when each takes the other entirely for granted, which many a woman has had to rue, when it transpires that the good faith of the "perfect understanding" has been on her side only. May was quite satisfied with things as they were, for a time. Her handsome lover sought her on every occasion. His eyes were full of love when they met hers, and he had a way of holding her hand as if he hated to let it go. He was her own, she felt, as much as if he had already asked her to be his wife, so she showed him pretty plainly that she loved him and was supremely happy.

His well-poised head was not very strong where women were concerned. It was flattering to him to feel that this girl watched for his coming, and was weary at his going. He liked the authority she had tacitly surrendered into his hands over her stable and kennels. The thought of how pleasant it would be to be the master of this establishment, and of its bright-hearted mistress, would obtrude upon him far too often. Then the thought of Marian would intervene, checking and making him gloomy for a time in a way that was unaccountable to May. At these times he would swear to himself that he would go away the next day, or else tell May that he was married. But when the next day came, he neither went away, nor did he tell her, but just threw dull care aside, and enjoyed himself to the utmost.

The day before he wrote that letter to his wife—one

passage from which has been given—Miss Meredith's horse had given her a nasty tumble at a bank by coming down on its knees and nose. She was not hurt, but a good deal shaken, and Ted Greg had been terribly frightened as he picked her up, and held her in a half stunned state in his arms for a few minutes. By the time she recovered the hounds, who were running fast at the time, were far away, and the field was out of sight.

"Oh, do go on, you'll be thrown out," she cried, and that she should think of him and of his pleasure first moved him strangely. He really loved her, and forgot everyone else for a moment, so touched was he by her consideration for himself.

"My darling, you don't suppose I am going on to leave *you*, do you?" he said tenderly, and as he spoke he bent his head down and kissed her.

It was the first time, and the girl had given him her whole heart, believing herself fully justified in doing so. There was no shame to her in the caress, but, on the contrary, much glory. That kiss seemed to her to bind them together and make them indissolubly one.

"My darling Ted! my own darling Ted!" she said, as he put her up on her horse. As she settled herself to her saddle, she bent down and pressed her lips on to his forehead, and the consciousness that he had gone too far sent the blood up into his face in a dark flush.

"We've lost the hounds hopelessly," she said, quite gayly for such a keen young sportswoman; "let us ride home and have some luncheon, and in the afternoon we'll look at that brown horse my man was saying yesterday would suit *you*. If it does I should like——"

She drew nearer to him, laid her hand on his arm, with a wealth of love and trust in her eyes, and went on:

"To give it to you, Ted!"

It was impossible for him to explain matters just now.

She was nervous and shaken from the effects of her fall still. It would be cruel to deal her a blow now.

So, as to refuse the horse would be to make an explanation needful, and as explanations were things he always deferred making until they were dragged out of him, he lifted her hand to his lips and called her his "darling" again. He shrank from giving her pain while he was present to see it, and he put the thought of what she must suffer by and by away from him till a more convenient season.

They went back to Belhaven and lunched, and he walked about afterward and exercised the authority she was thrusting into his hands, in a way that made the groom and gardener hate him as the coming master.

She had quite grasped by this time that he was a poor man, and her generous nature made her long to endow him with all the things she felt he ought to have. When it came to the point he could not bring himself to refuse the brown hunter, so she gave it to him, and it was arranged that the horse should stand in her stables until Ned left Trelyn and could take it away with him.

He was very fond of horses, and was rapturously grateful to her for giving him one. He knew that he would not be able to afford to keep it, but that was a disagreeable question which he felt he needn't consider yet—not for a week or two, at any rate. He wished that she hadn't tempted him to take it, but his refusal would have hurt her, and he couldn't bear the idea of hurting a girl who was so evidently fond of him.

She gave him a ring before he left that day—a ring that had belonged to her father—a pigeon's-blood ruby that was worth a small fortune. It bothered him a little to think how he should account to Marian for the possession of this ring. But that, too, was a difficulty that would not be met just yet. So he let May slip the ring on his finger, and he *wore it.*

When he left her that day May wandered about in a state of happy excitement from room to room. Presently, in the depths of an easy-chair in which he had been sitting, she saw an envelope. Picking it up, she read the address :

> EDWARD GREG, ESQ.,
> 2 Glen Cottages, Norwood, Surrey.

There was a letter in it, therefore she had an excuse for writing him a few lines and inclosing what she had found ; "as it might be of importance," she said. She did not copy the address ; there was no need for that, it was engraved on her memory.

Her messenger came back with a few lines of acknowledgement, beginning, "My own darling," and subscribing himself, "Yours devotedly," but he did not sign his name, and she felt chilled.

In the course of a few days he had a letter from his wife : a letter in which she poured out all the pent-up passion of her heart ; a letter reminding him of their early love, and of how it behooved them, above all people, to be all in all to one another ; a letter that revealed the writer in every line as a loving, patient, proud, heart-sore woman, who would rather die than lose his love ; a letter that touched Mr. Ted Greg considerably, and nearly brought the tears to his eyes, but that had not the power of keeping him away from unsuspicious May Meredith.

She met him now quite as if he were her avowed lover, rushing to meet him, holding out both hands and yielding up her lips frankly to his kisses.

"Have you told the St. Austles yet ?" she asked him, and he answered hesitatingly :

"They know I'm awfully fond of you ; I don't see that

there is any need to tell them more. We're very happy as we are, aren't we, my darling?"

"*That* we are!" she assented with energy. "Ted," she went on, "will you be as fond of this dear old place as I am?"

"I love Belhaven!" he declared.

"That's right, and I love Belhaven better than ever, because you do. I can't think how I shall get on here when you go away for a little time. Why must you go at all, Ted?"

"I have heaps of business to attend to, but I'll soon come back," he promised recklessly, and then he changed the subject and tried to forget that he had got himself into a most frightful coil.

There were times when Ella Poynter felt sickeningly jealous of her friend May's happiness and the apparent prosperity of her love affair. In spite of all the delicate encouragement she gave him, Guy St. Austle remained persistently cool to her, and devoted to her stepmother. If she could once detatch him from the widow, she (Ella) felt sure she could catch him in the rebound.

At last chance—she thought it was Providence—favored her.

They were speaking one night of the way in which handwriting revealed character, and as is usual when such discussions arise, some of the party were skeptical, while others believed firmly in the revelations as if they were Gospel truths. Guy, who was somewhat of an expert at the game, and who happened to know pretty nearly all that there was to be known about everyone present (with the exception of Ted Greg), had made some remarkably happy hits, and covered himself with glory. Suddenly Ella saw that Mr. Greg had not submitted himself to the ordeal.

"*Won't you* give Mr. St. Austle a scrap of your writing?"

she asked, and then she went on : "We all know you pretty well, I think, Mr. Greg, and what we know is so nice that we want to know more."

"A scrap of my writing? Certainly—but I mustn't write with intention, must I? And I'm afraid I haven't a bit written in blissful ignorance that I was going to be judged by it, anywhere," he answered, and May Meredith put in quickly:

"I have a note of yours in my pocket, Ted, that will do."

She pulled it out forthwith, looked at it, blushed and laughed, and tore off the beginning and ending, leaving only a few uncompromising words that related to the horses and dogs.

It was handed to Ella to pass on to Guy St. Austle, and as she glanced at it she changed color and looked across, half vindictively, half triumphantly, at her stepmother.

"Come, Ella! look sharp," May Meredith said impatiently, "I'm longing to know if Mr. St. Austle will find out anything fresh about Ted."

"Your writing is very familiar to me," Ella said incisively, looking from Mrs. Poynter to Ted Greg, "I know it by heart, for I have a letter of yours——"

"Ella!" Mrs. Poynter had risen and come round to the excited girl's side. "My dear child, stop!" she whispered in an agony of pathetic appeal.

"You have a letter of Mr. Greg's!" May Meredith put in haughtily.

"Yes—and I'll show it, too," said the little fury.

CHAPTER XVII.

CARELESS AND CURIOUS.

"You deciphered Mr. Greg's character from his writing pretty accurately, now will you decipher the character of the man who wrote *this?*"

Ella Poynter was the speaker, and of course the person she addressed was Mr. St. Austle. She held a letter out to him as she spoke, and before he gave himself time to think he read :

"'My own, only darling—bravest as well as dearest of women—if I ever forget what you——'"

"It's Greg's writing! Where on earth did you get this letter?"

"It's the letter I wanted to show you before—the one I found among my father's papers; it *is* Mr. Greg's writing, isn't it?"

She spoke eagerly, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. At last his eyes would be opened to the unworthiness of her stepmother.

"I am not sure that it is," he said coldly, handing her back the letter as he spoke; "it was not fair of you, Miss Poynter, to trick me into reading a letter I have already refused to look at."

Tears of vexation sprang into her eyes.

"How blindly infatuated you must be," she panted out; "I tell you this letter was marked in my father's writing, 'From my false wife's lover,' yet you're ready to take that man's——"

"Hush!" he said sternly, and Ella was startled into silence as she followed the direction of his eyes, and saw Mrs. Poynter herself coming toward them.

"What has agitated you so, Ella?" she asked nervously. She had no suspicion of what the matter under discussion between Guy and Ella had been, but the appearance of an intimate understanding, and of confidential intercourse between them, was distressing to the woman to whom Guy had vowed fidelity.

"Shall I tell her?" Ella asked maliciously.

"Certainly not!" Mr. St. Austle said hastily; then seeing that Mrs. Poynter looked hurt and mystified, he added :

"Miss Poynter has been allowing her imagination to run away with her; unless she curbs it she will get into mischief, I'm afraid."

"How *can you* speak of me in that way?" Ella whispered, subdued but frantically jealous still; but Guy, instead of responding to her, followed Mabel to the window recess in which she had settled herself.

"Don't be annoyed with me," he pleaded, in such a low tone that, though she strained her ears to the utmost, Ella could not catch a word.

"I'm not annoyed, only puzzled," Mrs. Poynter rejoined.

"Not more puzzled than I am myself; come into the garden and have a turn," he added, pushing open the window, and to Ella's chagrin Mrs. Poynter obeyed him at once, though she had nothing but her indoor gear on.

"Flattering him by doing exactly whatever he chooses to ask her, even at the risk of getting rheumatism in her old head," the girl thought indignantly, as the pair who were outraging her passed out of her sight. The next moment she ran after them, calling out:

"Shall I fetch you a wrap, Mrs. Poynter? You have always told me you never could stand the frosty air, even when you were young."

"Thanks, Ella, I shall be very glad of the wrap; my poor old head is giving premonitory symptoms of neuralgia already."

The offer was accepted in such perfect good faith, Mrs. Poynter was so absolutely unconscious of there being anything to be ashamed of in the fact of her being no longer a young woman, that Ella retired discomfited, and did not reappear with the wrap which she had so considerately offered, but neither of them noticed her non-appearance.

"And now," said Mrs. Poynter, when they found themselves alone in a sheltered, high laurel-hedged walk, "will

you tell me what the mystery is which Ella and you are trying to manufacture?"

She spoke very lightly, and as if the matter in question were of no moment whatever to her, but she became grave enough when Guy replied:

"It is about Greg. For some reason or other Ella has become suspicious of him."

"Good Heavens, *why?*" Mrs. Poynter cried. "How I wish she had never come here! How is it possible that any suspicion of him should have been created in her mind?"

"Then there is some ground——" he was beginning, when Mabel interrupted him.

"Yes, yes; at least I fear—I hardly know what I fear. I only wish the poor child had never seen, or ever heard of the man. It's the very irony of fate that she should have done so after the precautions that have been taken."

She spoke more to herself than to him, but he answered her:

"You're not afraid that he has interested her seriously, are you? If so, I can assure you your alarms are groundless. She has been well pleased to see him devoted to her friend, May Meredith, and has only liked him herself in a casual, friendly sort of way that meant nothing at all up to the present time. Now she dislikes him; can *you* tell me why?"

He watched her keenly, and she felt that he did so; but there was neither fear nor shame in her sweet eyes, as she lifted them to his.

"It must be intuition," she said. "Some day I may tell you why poor Ella has taken this instinctive dislike to him, but not now; I dare not tell you now."

"It can't be anything that concerns herself; thank God for that!" he thought, and then he led her on to identify *herself with* his dramatic and literary interests, without

asking for any expression of more directly personal feeling from her for the time.

"Will you have the courage to witness my possible failure, the first night my play comes out, in my company?" he asked, and she told him:

"It will be a triumph, I feel sure, and I shall be proud to be with you to be the first to congratulate you."

"Thank you, Mabel," he said, and then he tucked her hand into his arm, and though not a word of love was spoken between them they each felt that they were being drawn across the invisible barrier which had separated them.

When they went in to luncheon that day they found Mrs. Davis seated at the table brimming over with excitement and emotion. At last, as she had always prophesied, she had heard from the lost Robert. He had written "most affectionately and sensibly," she told them, and had sent her banknotes for a hundred pounds. How he had got hold of her address passed all understanding; his having done so "proved conclusively," she declared, "how vigilantly he must have sought for tidings of her." The one drawback to her complete contentment was that he gave her no hint as to his own whereabouts. There was no address, and the letter had been posted at the General Post Office. so she had not the faintest clew to his local habitation. But sufficient unto the faithful woman's day was the hearing from him, and the hundred pounds.

Up in that quiet little cottage in the most secreted part of Norwood the tide of life ebbed and flowed very gently and monotonously. Sometimes, for days together, Mrs. Greg would see nothing of her strange lodger, who would depart at night with a small Gladstone, and reappear after a brief absence at night again, always much muffled up about the head and throat as though he feared the inclem-

encies of the climate, to which he avowed he could never get accustomed. Then again he would have a long spell of home staying, and while these spells were on him, he would make little overtures of a friendly nature toward Mrs. Greg when she came in to superintend the arrangement of the table for his eight o'clock dinner.

On one of these occasions she told him that her husband was staying at Trelyn Towers, in Cornwall, with an old friend of his, Sir Walter St. Austle, and to her surprise Mr. Denham betrayed unwonted interest and animation at hearing of a fact which, to her belief, could not concern him in the slightest degree.

He knew that it was a dangerous topic for him to venture upon, still he could not resist the fascination of skirmishing round it, and trying to gain some tidings of those who were dearer to him than anything else in this world, excepting his love for speculation and his longing for security.

"Sir Walter St. Austle married the sister of a man who was well-known in the mercantile world, didn't he?" Mr. Denham asked, and Mrs. Greg told him she "had but a dim recollection of the affair, but she fancied there had been some commercial scandal connected with the St. Austle marriage."

"To be sure; it happened about the time I came here, if I remember rightly," Denham went on, and Mrs. Greg, who was arranging flowers on the table at the moment, did not observe the half scared, half sly expression of his face as he added: "The man who came to grief left a wife and children, if I remember? Let me see; did the man die, or did he cut and run?"

"I forget," Mrs. Greg said carelessly, "but my husband will be home in a few days, and he will be able to tell you all about them. Oh, by the way, he does say in a letter I had from him to-day that 'that scoundrel Davis' wife and children are living in one of St. Austle's houses at Trelyn,

and the good fellow supports them entirely.' Perhaps Davis was the man you mean?"

"Yes, Davis was the name," Mr. Denham assented. Then, suddenly, he became very thoughtful, and Mrs. Greg, who was used to his moods, went away softly, leaving him alone with his dainty dinner and doleful reflections.

It was this information which enabled him to send the banknotes for a hundred pounds to his wife, together with the promise that a like sum should be sent to her every four months until such time as the enterprise in which he had embarked should prove successful enough to enable him to reclaim his beloved wife and children.

He forgot in his egotism and uxoriousness to say anything about the sister whom he had defrauded and the brother-in-law whom he had duped. His wife, in her balmy satisfaction at hearing from him at all, and at having her needs partially supplied by him again, was quite regardless of this carelessness or callousness, whichever it might have been. But Laura felt hurt at it, and her husband resentful about it; so resentful that, for the first time since the disaster, he permitted himself to say some truthfully hard things about Robert Davis.

"He's a rogue right through," Walter St. Austle said to his friend Ted Greg; "he robbed his own sister and duped me, and if I can ever help to get him out of the country for the country's good, I'll do it. That poor woman, his wife, and his children, are better off without him than they ever would be with him. He's my wife's brother; but for his own sake, it's to be hoped he'll never give me the chance of helping justice to handle him."

"Is he handsome—like Lady St. Austle?" Ted Greg asked for the sake of saying something about a matter that was profoundly uninteresting to him, and yet about which he was expected to speak.

"Not a bit! You'll find a photograph of him kicking

about in my wife's album. I won't have him framed and glazed and put into prominent places with the rest of the family, but poor Laura, who can never be got to see that he is nothing better than a common swindler, has a grateful recollection of the scoundrel, and keeps his likeness in her book. I'll show it to you to-night."

Sir Walter did show it to Mr. Greg that night, and the smug mutton-chop-whiskered face struck Ted Greg with a curious sense of familiarity. But he could not locate it, or remember whether it belonged to his childhood or to his later years.

The Trelyn party had broken up and gone their several ways. To the annoyance of Sir Walter and Lady St. Austle, and to the inwardly heart-broken chagrin of May Meredith, Ted Greg had gone without speaking those decisive words which he had led the girl to suppose he would speak. Bitterly she blamed him, and not less bitterly did she blame herself for having given the St. Austles the right to inquire whether the open and unabashed love-making, which had taken place in their house, had come to a legitimate conclusion or not. But her anger against her tardy lover was always short-lived, and was invariably succeeded by an even warmer thrill of love for him and longing for his presence than had gone before.

For several days after his departure May Meredith possessed her soul in patience, in the vain hope and expectation that the next post would bring a letter from him, but no letter came, and when a full week had elapsed she could be patient no longer. She determined that she would write to him! She had the right to do this! She "belonged to a class with which no gentleman would dare to tamper and trifle," she told herself proudly. The words of love that he had addressed to her were such words as no *man living could* have addressed to *her* unless he looked

upon her as his future wife. It was only that he was negligent and procrastinating; she had always recognized these qualities in him. Or perhaps he was ill and unable to write? The bare idea of this being the case melted away the last bit of her pride and reticence, and caused her to sit down and pour out her heart upon paper, after injudicious woman's most injudicious manner.

How heartily she congratulated herself, in her weakness and blindness, poor girl, on having got hold of his address. Of course "he would have given it to her if she had asked him for it," she told herself; "probably he thought he had given it to her, and all this time he might be waiting expectantly for a few lines from her!" He should not wait much longer. He should soon know how absolutely devoted she was to him, how she trusted him, and how proudly glad she would be to share that good fortune and dear home, which were hers to do as she liked with, with him.

The rebound from the restraint she had exercised over herself for a week was such a strong one that it broke down all those slight barriers of reserve which she would have respected under a more normal condition of affairs. If she had not been tortured, by doubt and distrust of him, into the reactionary state of ultra-generosity of feeling toward him, she would have worded her letter more circumspectly. As it was, she wrote:

"MY OWN DARLING TED:

"Your silence has made me horribly anxious! Something must, I fancy, have happened to make you forgetful—or at least neglectful—of me for a week. Walter St. Austle tells me he has had a few lines from you, 'written in good spirits,' he says, so I comfort myself by thinking that at least you are not ill. But, O Ted! how can you write in good spirits *when you're* away from me, and must know

that I am wearing my heart out with impatience to see you again. The place misses you, I'm sure, for even the rooms look sad now you're gone. The horses and dogs miss you, and I *more* than miss you, my own love. The May Meredith of three months ago would have laughed to scorn the May Meredith who is writing this. But let those laugh who win, and the May Meredith who writes this has won what she considers the greatest prize on earth, and that is your love—for I *have* won it, haven't I, my own darling Ted?

"How glad I am that I never frittered even a little bit of my heart away on any other man before you came. Are you glad, too?

"I can't help telling you all I feel, for I owe it to you that I feel so strongly.

"Don't wait for a post; wire a reply to this that will set my uneasiness at rest. The words I hope the telegram will contain are, 'Well, and coming.'

"Yours always and entirely,

"MAY."

Ted Greg had been at home with his wife for several days when this letter was delivered at the cottage. His habits, even when in that humble home, were those of a sybarite compared to those in which Mrs. Greg found it possible to indulge. The one servant was quite unable to supply all the service and attention which was demanded by her master, consequently his wife had to supplement the maid of all work's efforts. It was Marian who "arranged" the hot bath he liked to take before dinner in the evening, and his morning's cold tub. These things, together with their accompaniments of cork mat and bath towels, were always ready for him when he wanted them, and so it never occurred to him to inquire who carried up the heavy cans of water from the basement. If he had seen Marian doing

it, he would have asked her, "Why the devil she didn't make her slavey do it?" and would have been ruffled at the spectacle of his wife doing hard manual labor for his sake, for a few minutes. But as he did not see her, he closed his mind against the entrance of all speculation on the subject, and went on enjoying his bath in an unruffled mood.

On the morning that May's letter was delivered at the cottage, he was enjoying an early cup of coffee in bed when the postman came. It was so unusual for him to have letters addressed to him here that his wife took it up to him at once, and expressed some faint curiosity as to "who his lady correspondent could be?" The conditions of her life had made her sensitively jealous and suspicious, and though she battled against these demons to the best of her ability they overmastered her at times.

A dark flush covered his face as he recognized the writing of the girl he had so cruelly befooled. But his manner was unembarrassed and his tone unconcerned as he said:

"It's from Lady St. Austle, I suppose; she does a lot of note-writing for St. Austle."

He flung himself back upon the pillows as he spoke, opening the letter and holding his hand in such a way that she could not get a glimpse of its contents. In a moment he crumpled it up, and turned round sleepily.

"Only a beast of a bill, after all," he said, and Marian turned away impatiently, for she knew he was lying to her.

An hour afterward, having carefully and fastidiously tubbed, dressed, and breakfasted, he went off to town, and Mrs. Greg went up to make the bed and put the room to rights. The first thing her eyes lighted upon was the crumpled letter thrown carelessly on the dressing table. Conquering her scruples about invading his privacy for once, she picked it up, smoothed it out, and read it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARIAN IS SATISFIED.

WHEN Ted Greg read that letter from May Meredith he felt as much shocked as a careless, selfish man can feel, when he first tastes the bitterness of the fruit he has planted and cherished. That May was thoroughly and seriously in earnest he had known uneasily for some time. But he had mistakenly reckoned on her pride preserving her from pursuing him for an explanation, when he had retreated without having given her one. He had failed to bear in mind that a woman in love has a habit of putting her pride in her pocket, when the man she is in love with is concerned.

To do him full justice he felt very much ashamed of himself, and very desirous of keeping the cause of that feeling of shame a secret from Miss Meredith still.

"By Jove! if she ever finds out that I'm a married man she'll turn and rend me—round on me to Marian—and then there'll be the devil to pay," he told himself, as he read the warmly worded epistle for the second time. "I suppose I must answer it," he thought ruefully, "but how? that's the question." Then he came to the conclusion that there was no hurry for a day or two; he would think it over. The sense of relief which he experienced on coming to this decision made him careless, and the effect of this carelessness was that the tell-tale letter was reposing on the dressing table when Marian went up to arrange the room with the scrupulous cleanliness and dainty care which he always expected should be maintained in the little establishment.

Fortunately there was no one by to see the paroxysm of rage and pain which possessed her, as she read the words which proved how false the man had been for whom she *had sacrificed* everything that a woman holds dear. Foully

false to her, and cruelly false to the other woman, who evidently wrote in the belief that she was justified in the tone she adopted toward him.

"He is tired of me," the miserable woman moaned, falling on her knees by the side of the bed; "tired of me, of *me*, who still worship him as much as on that unhappy day when he first told me he loved me. He has been ashamed of me for a long time; I know it now, though I have shut my eyes to it for so long. And now he has taught another woman to love him to her misery, and *how* he must have seemed to love her, for her to write in this way.

The words, "Whatever *is* the matter, ma'am," spoken in a spasm of curiosity and astonishment by her young servant girl, roused Mrs. Greg to a recollection of what was due to appearances and herself.

"The matter! oh, nothing!" she said, hastily rising up and clutching that criminating letter closely in her hand. Was it Ted's honor she wanted to spare by the concealment? or was it the desire to save herself from mortification? Who can tell? Her motives were mixed, as merely human motives must always be.

The whole of that day she wasted in vain repining and idle tears. She was not made of the stern stuff that can cast an idol out of the heart, when the idol totters unworthily. It hurt her horribly to think that the man she had loved to her sorrow, should have used blandishments and endearments toward another woman. But she could not dislike the man, she could only hate the woman who had beguiled him.

For, of course, she argued that this May must have tempted him in an unseemly and disgraceful manner, before he could so grossly have forgotten himself as to make the serious love to her, which May's letter implied he had made. How could she punish the bold girl without bringing odium on Ted? Faulty as he was, his wife would not be the one

to hurt him in the eyes of the world. But the bold woman who was pursuing him with her amorous, written words into the sanctuary of his home should be made to feel the full force of her indiscretion.

How could she be got at? that was the question. She had given neither address nor surname. She had merely signed herself "his always and entirely, May." For all Mrs. Gray knew, it might be a married woman who was striving to take Ted away from her. There was more bitterness in this possibility than in the idea of its being an unmarried girl who was her rival. A married woman, she knew from sad experience, would be more likely to forfeit her position for the sake of retaining him than an unmarried one would be.

"If I could only get at her I'd stab her to the heart as she has stabbed me," the unhappy woman thought; "I'd send this letter to her husband, and wring a promise from Ted never to see or speak to her again on pain of my exposing her." Then she raged afresh at her own inability to get hold of this hateful May, and finally came to the conclusion that the only thing she could do was to tax Ted outright with his perfidy, and make his full confession the price of her silence.

He came home in quite a cheerful mood that night. His conscience had ceased to prick him with regard to May; indeed, he had almost forgotten the circumstance of having had a letter from her, and was entirely oblivious of the fact of having lost it. Some shares in a syndicate, in which he had recently invested, had been sold advantageously, and he was altogether feeling prosperous and happy. On this lively mood of his, Marian's depression fell like cold water, and it was in both an injured and angry tone that he inquired, "What the devil is the matter with you?"

"This!" she gasped out, passion overcoming her at

sight of his nonchalance, and as she spoke she held the letter out open before him.

He caught it from her, and tore it to tatters in a moment, muttering, as he did so, that it served her right for prying into his correspondence.

"I can explain everything, if you'll only leave off foaming and fulminating, Marian," he went on after a few moments.

"Who is the woman? Give me her name, tell me where she lives, and I will write her such a letter as will teach her not to address another woman's husband as her 'own darling Ted' again."

"Let the poor girl alone, Marian; she's innocent of all wrong-doing. She has got fond of me, believing me to be an unmarried man."

"Is *she* a married woman?"

"No, she's a girl, I tell you, and a very nice girl, too; but even if it had been a married woman, you, of all people, might have judged her leniently."

"You coward!" she flamed out, "you taunt me with the folly and sin you taught me to commit. O Ted! forgive me" (he had turned away with an oath), "I am half mad at the idea of your thinking of another woman. Tell me that it was not your fault; tell me that she led you on; tell me you have not been deliberately false to me!"

"I tell you the girl's as good a girl as ever stepped; we got friendly, and she mistook my friendliness for a deeper feeling, that's the long and the short of it. When I found she expected me to propose I hadn't the heart or the moral courage to undeceive her. So you see, Marian, if anyone is to be blamed for it, you must blame me, but I don't see that you have any reason to complain or to find fault about such a trifle."

"No reason to complain, when you have led a girl on to address you in such passionate language? What do you

think I am made of, Ted? God knows all pride has been long since crushed down in me, but it is not quite extinct, and to my sorrow, I have the power of loving and being jealous as strongly developed in me as ever."

"There's where you're so silly," he said, turning away from the unpleasant spectacle of her flushed, tear-stained face, "you're my wife, and even if I wanted to chuck you, I couldn't do it, we're too tightly tied up for that, for I believe you're too fond of me to divorce me, even if I gave you good cause for doing it, which I shan't do."

He laughed airily as he concluded his argument. In a way he was fond of his wife, and in a way he liked May Meredith. But the reflection that his conduct had already caused exquisite pain to Marian, and would smite May even more cruelly when she came to know of it, caused him only the most transitory feeling of regret. "It was awkward," he admitted, "annoying, in fact, that May should have been such a little fool as to pour her heart out on paper. Women of the nineteenth century, with ages of experience behind them, ought at least to have learnt that no more fatal folly than this lavish letter-writing can be committed." As for his wife, he hoped that it would be a lesson to her not to pry into his correspondence again. At her age she ought to have done with jealousy and every other dramatic folly and settle down into a nice, ladylike endurance of the present, and course of preparation for the future. For in spite of his own lack of either religious feeling or profession, he liked the idea of his wife being bound by scruples of faith and morality now that she was his wife. A woman with no regard for both these things was certain eventually to go very much to the bad, therefore it was incumbent on Mrs. Greg to conceive and carry out a high-toned life, in which unquestioning devotion and absolute fidelity to himself in thought, word, and deed, was the first condition. He was quite easy in his conscience about

leaving her unwritten to for several weeks, while he was enjoying the society of people who were either unconscious or forgetful of Marian's existence. But he would have considered her conduct unwomanly, unwifelike, and altogether unworthy, if, when he came home, she had given him a cool welcome, or he had discovered that she had given either words or smiles of more than the most ordinary civility to any other man.

As a rule, he had been able to exorcise the torturing demons of jealousy which occasionally took possession of her. His way was winning, even if it was careless, and he had the great hold on her affection of never worrying or finding fault in an irritable manner about trifles. If things displeased him he frankly rapped out a condemnatory oath, but he neither harped upon the unpleasant subject, nor recurred to it when she had done her best to rectify the fault. In addition, he was open-handed. When he had money he gave it to her freely, and did not suspiciously cross-examine her as to what she had done with it. She was, also, still absurdly proud of his appearance. The charms of his fine figure, swagger manner, and handsome, manly face were as potent with her as ever. So, in consequence of these traits and appearances, she remained his romantically willing slave still, and the woman who was reserved and haughty with all the rest of the world was as humble and pliant in her dealings with him as the veriest sultan could desire.

But on this occasion she was not readily appeased, and the demon of jealousy was not easily exorcised. When he turned away from her with an airy explanation that was half a rebuke, she did not follow him with a prompt offer to make it up—to forget the offense and say no more about it. On the contrary, she followed him with a request that at least he would write a letter to the young lady who had addressed him in the apparent belief that she was

addressing her future husband, at her (Marian's) dictation, and give it to her to post.

"If you won't do me this poor justice, this small favor, I will leave you to-day, and you shall never be troubled by the sight or hearing of me again. I mean it, Ted! You know when I make up my mind to a course I take it," she said firmly, and he began to feel that he was liable to being forced into an unpleasant position by her determination.

"You're the most unreasonable woman that ever stepped," he said, with a fair show of indignation. "I tell you I'll put an end to it, and never see or speak to the girl again; but I am not going to give her up to your claws. Women are so apt to develop the tigress when they're scratched slightly. You would dictate a good many cruel and a good many unjust words, my dear, and I don't mean to be the one to write them."

"Then I shall leave you to-night," she said quietly.

"You'll not be fool enough—I mean unkind enough to do anything of the kind when you're a little cooler, Marian," he replied, trying a move that had never failed to checkmate her before, namely, holding out his face toward hers for a kiss.

She shook her head vehemently, and blushed deeply.

"You evidently bestow such caresses too freely for me to value them any longer, Ted—at least, until I have some assurance that for the future you will not dishonor yourself and wrong me by bestowing them on anybody else. Once more! will you give me this assurance, in the way I ask you, about this person 'May,' at least?"

"For Heaven's sake, don't speak so contemptuously about a girl who's simply a perfect girl, and who belongs to one of the best families of the county."

"I've no wish to speak contemptuously of the girl. Poor girl! I pity her too much for being your victim to the extent of thinking that you mean to marry her. But I can

only speak of her by the name she signs to that very unguarded epistle. Poor girl! how she would smart if she knew that you threw it about carelessly for any other woman to pick up and read!"

"I was so bothered and shocked at her writing to me that I hardly knew what I was doing this morning," he said self-excusingly. "You see, Marian, I never asked her to write to me even, never dreamt of giving her my address——"

"She loved you, and found it out. I love you, and will find hers out yet," Marian interrupted. Then she left him, and he knew presently, by the sounds that came from the room above, that she was packing her trunks and preparing to carry out her threat of leaving him.

A wave of the old tender feeling for her, which had grown faint and weak of late years, swept over his soul as he thought of what his home, seldom as he inhabited it, would be without her. This was accompanied by the sharp, stinging recollection of all he had led her to lose in the bygone time, when she was a young beauty, the mistress of a lovely home, the mother of a much loved child!

"By Jove! I owe it to her to satisfy her, and make an end of it with May at once," he cried impulsively, as he seated himself at her davenport and wrote:

"I take the whole blame of what has unfortunately occurred on myself. Your letter has been inadvertently opened and read by my wife. I can only humbly apologize to you for not having told you I was a married man, but the subject never seemed to come on the *tapis* naturally, and I most blamably shrank from introducing it. I need not assure you that I shall always entertain the most profound respect for you, and that my wife exonerates you from all blame in this unfortunate misconception. With the deepest humility and regret, allow me to subscribe myself, yours *most sincerely,* EDWARD GREG."

It was a bitter pill to swallow, having to write this letter, but his spirits rose slightly as he reflected that, at any rate, it would appease Marian and make things all straight with her again. However, when he took it up and showed it to her, with many affectionate protestations of his desire to "please her and set her heart at rest at any cost to the young lady," she astonished him by saying, "If that is really your desire, Ted, you will now address this letter and give it to me to post!"

"That will give you the command of her name and address, Marian; that would be beastly unfair——" he began hotly; but when she turned away with a short, angry sigh and recommenced her packing, he gave in to the extent of saying:

"Come to the post office with me and see me drop it into the box, will *that* satisfy you?"

"Yes," she agreed, and he ran downstairs and was standing smoking his cigarette with the letter in its envelope, and the latter sealed, stamped, and addressed in his hand.

But at the last his heart had failed him, and for the letter he had submitted to his wife for her approval he had substituted his card, with the name of his club printed on it, and the words:

"Write to club if you don't hear from me in a week or two. Yours, TED."

"That will choke her off without telling her the whole brutal truth," he thought complacently. He had no intention of writing to her in a week, or ever again, and he relied on pique and pride keeping her silent. He did not know May Meredith!

CHAPTER XIX.

"I AM YOUR MOTHER."

MRS. POYNTER and Ella had been home about three weeks, and to the growing jealous distress of the girl it was clear that a happy understanding had been arrived at between her stepmother and Mr. St. Austle. Mrs. Poynter looked so gently, and he so triumphantly happy that there could be no doubt about it, and so Ella was only angry and not astonished when Mrs. Poynter said :

"You have often heard me say I should never marry again, Ella ; well, my dear, I have thought better of that resolution, and I am going to marry Guy St. Austle. Your home will be with me still, dear, till you leave it for a happier one of your own."

Mrs. Poynter's own happiness had made her feel more kindly, and speak more affectionately, to her stepdaughter than she had done since the discovery of the attempted interference on Ella's part while they were at Trelyn. The woman had intuitively felt that the girl's hand was against her with regard to Guy. But now the girl's hand had been proved powerless. Guy had been more ardent than ever in his determination to overcome her unworded motive for refusing him. And now that he had overcome it, and she was openly and legitimately engaged to him, she allowed the happiness that was in her heart to expand fully and freely, and overflow upon all within her radius.

But Ella's way of receiving and responding to her avowal was chilling.

"Any home of my own would be happier than the one with you has ever been, and as for staying on as a visitor in a house where Mr. St. Austle was master, I'd rather go out as a scullery maid than do it."

very much at first, and he will be
Ella, if you'll let him."

"I hate him now," Ella gasped
that her anger against him was u
able; but she had permitted he
him without sufficient cause, and
she now fancied she hated him, a
with undue ferocity.

"I hate him, and I suppose you
to keep me here against my will, tc
the love-making and the wedding
write to May Meredith, and ask her
she has asked me to pay her a visi

There was nothing to be said
Mrs. Poynter liked May Meredith
infatuation for Mr. Greg. But th
and its consequences over, she be
no fear of Ella's meeting him at B

It turned out, however, that M
receive Ella at Belhaven just the
town on business that is

tions to his future wife, even though she could not complain of any undue love-making.

A fortnight passed and then Ella had a telegram from Miss Meredith, saying:

"Call on me to-morrow, any time, at the Great Western Hotel."

Appearances and locality were held in high account by Miss Poynter. It annoyed her that she could not tell her girl friends that she was going either to the Metropole or the Grand to see, and probably stay with, her *great* friend, Miss Meredith, a Cornish heiress. It sounded humdrum to say she was going to the Great Western to see anyone. They would think May was a mere country bumpkin for putting up at a place that had such an old-world reputation about it, and that didn't sound up to date. Accordingly, she vaunted May and the intimacy less than she would have done otherwise.

But when she saw Miss Meredith all minor considerations of the vain and bumptious, and even of the socially aspiring order, vanished, for the Cornish girl's first words told of a distress and wrong beside which her own looked puerile.

"Ella, help me to find out the truth about Mr. Greg! I *must* find it out now! at once! or I shall die of shame. *Will* you help me?"

"Yes," Ella stuttered out unsteadily. She had brought her own wrongs, intending to ventilate them in the sympathetic atmosphere of a friend who had time on her hands which she could afford to frivol away in considering them. Now, this friend had won the toss and was already posing as the owner of a far more tragic grievance. It was hard on Ella, but as it was about Mr. Greg that the unpalatable truth had to be discovered, Ella was quite ready to aid and abet in the discovery, and resignedly let her own less definite wrongs remain in abeyance for the time.

Then May, with many diversions, and interruptions from

herself, into paths of incident and experience that took Ella into quite a new and untried country, told her story, or rather a portion of it. She extenuated nothing as far as she was concerned, nor did she set down aught in malice to him; but she gave Ella to understand that either he was very much of a rogue, or she very much of a fool, and she meant to have a clear understanding as to which was which.

"He said he would write me in a week or two, and the two weeks have passed and he hasn't written. What would you do if you were me?"

"Exactly what you'll do—*if* I were you," Ella said promptly, "but if you ask me what I would do if a man served *me* so, I'll tell you."

"Tell me."

"Bowl him out. He has a secret at that Norwood place; go and find it out for yourself; don't waste time in writing to his club."

"I can't think it's anything bad," May protested.

"What would you call 'bad'?" Ella asked harshly. She was in the mood to believe the worst about any man. Guy St. Austle had failed *her* (she forgot that she had no claim on him), therefore any lesser man might confidently be expected to fail any lesser woman.

"I should think it bad, very bad, if while he was pretending to me, he was engaged to another girl."

"You would soon find out if that were the case if you went to the place where he doesn't want you to write to him. There must be a landlady, or someone, there who would be able to tell you something about him if he should happen to be out. It will be time enough after you have been to Norwood to write to his club."

"It looks dreadfully like prying into his private affairs," May said hesitatingly and despondently, but she was presently cheered and strung up by Ella remarking:

"*You look* upon yourself as engaged to him, don't you?

You ought to know something about his private affairs before you marry him, and as you have no father or mother to inquire into them for you, you must do it yourself."

"I don't like the idea of going alone," May admitted. For once in her life the girl was feeling shy and diffident. Or it might have been that, in her prophetic soul, she felt that in her pursuit of knowledge she would receive a deadly wound.

"What did you come up to town to do, then?" Ella asked practically.

"I intended writing to ask him to call on me here, and then I should have had you with me, and it wouldn't have seemed such a forward and bold proceeding."

"You can have me with you at Norwood, if you like. I'll go with the greatest pleasure," Ella said eagerly. It was one of her heartiest desires to find out something, especially if it were anything bad, about Mr. Greg. For she still believed that he was the man who had been the unlawful lover of her stepmother, and the bane of her father's second married life.

"You *are* good to go with me. I shan't mind it half as much if I have you to back me up," May said gratefully. "You're so ready and quick that you'll make it seem a much less out of the way proceeding than I should. I should be sure to blurt out something that would be better left unsaid, if I had to tackle the landlady alone."

"Perhaps he may be living with his mother or a relation. It may be his home, not lodgings only," Ella suggested.

"Oh, I think if it had been his home he wouldn't have minded my writing there. But you know men are careless with their letters, and he was probably afraid of mine falling into the landlady's hands. I'm sure, if it had been his home, he would have spoken to me about it when we were talking about his settling down at Belhaven. You can't

think how fond he is of Belhaven, Ella! It's lucky that he is, for I don't think that I could have made up my mind to marry a man who didn't love Belhaven and the horses and dogs as well as I do myself. It's lucky that he does, isn't it?"

"Very lucky," Ella said laconically.

"How I long to have him back there," May resumed enthusiastically; "he enjoys the country life so thoroughly, and he'll enjoy it more than ever when he's master of everything."

"Very likely."

"There'll be no more business bothers to keep him away from me then," May resumed, pursuing her own blissful train of thought.

"What *is* Mr. Greg? What is his business?"

"I'm sure I don't know," May laughed unconcernedly; "he never talked about it to me; we had other things to think and speak about."

"It doesn't much matter what he is, as he is to be master of Belhaven. Only I wonder——" Ella paused, and Miss Meredith asked quickly:

"What do you wonder at?"

"His being so reserved with such a frank, outspoken girl as you are, especially as he seemed so frank and outspoken himself about unimportant things."

"The truth is, I believe we were in love with each other from the first, and thought of nothing but ourselves when we were together; just ourselves and the hunting, and the horses and dogs, you know."

"I suppose that was it," Ella assented, but she did not quite mean what she said.

It was a dreary, drizzling day when they went down to Norwood, and to this circumstance they attributed a certain dejection of spirit which possessed them both when they *reached their* bourn in a fly. The seclusion of the lane,

and the smallness of the cottage, made an unpleasant impression upon the mistress of Belhaven. She did not like the idea of her hero living for ever so short a time in such an humble and out of the way place.

"I was right; he can only have lodged here," she whispered to Ella; and the next moment she had rung the bell. In a minute the door was opened by a maid servant, who stared at such unwonted visitors in undisguised astonishment.

"Is Mr. Greg staying here?" Miss Meredith asked.

"Yes, miss, but he's not at home now."

"When is he likely to be in?" May asked less confidently.

"To dinner at seven, miss."

"I should like to come in and write a note to him. Will you ask the land—the mistress of the house if I can do so."

"That's Mrs. Greg. Yes, miss," the girl said promptly; "walk inside, if you please, young ladies, and I'll call the mistress."

"It is his home, and it must be his mother," Ella murmured to May, who had grown suddenly very pale, as they were ushered into the little sitting room which was rife with evidences of Mr. Greg's habitual occupancy. Several photographs of himself were about on the piano and mantelpiece, and a double frame held, as the pendant to the handsome Ted, one, a lady, whose melancholy beauty and glorious eyes attracted Ella's attention at once.

"This can't be his mother," May said, her lips trembling; "it must be his sister. What a sweet face! Why, Ella, she's like *you*."

The door opened and the original of the sweet-faced photograph stood before the astonished girls; but there was no sweetness in the eyes that flashed fire as they lighted on May.

"You wish to leave a note for my—for Mr. Greg?" she said coldly, and May answered hurriedly:

"If you will kindly allow me. I am Miss Meredith—May—perhaps he has spoken of me to you."

"You are the person who wrote to him rather more than a fortnight ago, addressing him as your 'own darling Ted,'" Mrs. Greg said, speaking very deliberately, never moving her eyes from the face of the now thoroughly startled and confused girl before her.

"I wrote to him as you say, but I am sure he has not been base enough to show my letter—the letter of the girl who is to be his wife—to anyone," May began proudly. She was going on to say "Not even to you, who may be his sister," but she was stopped by a bitter laugh and the words:

"My husband did not show me your letter, you are right there, Miss Meredith; but I found it and read it, and made him reply to it with the truth that he is a married man. After that, how dared you follow him here?"

She asked the question commandingly, but May was incapable of answering her. Before Mrs. Greg had uttered it the warm-hearted, proud, fearless young Cornish girl had tottered and fallen on the floor, a mass of insensibility for a time.

"You are cruel, you are *brutal*," Ella flamed out fiercely; "she never knew he was married; *she* never heard it from him. It is he who has been a blackguard, not she who is to blame."

She was down on the floor, supporting her friend's head tenderly as she spoke; looking up to take a glass of water from Mrs. Greg's hand, she found that lady staring straight at her with a mixture of amazement and agony in her expression, that startled the girl into exclaiming:

"Why are you looking at me so? Haven't I—yes, surely *I have*—seen you before?"

"Tell me your name!" Mrs. Greg had grown as pale as her unconscious rival, and, as she spoke, she staggered to a chair.

"Ella Poynter is my name," Ella said wonderingly, and then, to her consternation, the woman who had spoken with harshness that almost amounted to brutality to her innocent rival, broke into a storm of tears as she sprang forward, caught Ella in her arms, and showered kisses on the girl's face.

"Who are you? you frighten me," Ella stammered, and a cry of what sounded like horror broke from her, when Mrs. Greg answered:

"I am your mother!"

CHAPTER XX.

BROKEN AND CONTRITE.

"No, no, no! don't say such a wicked thing. *My* mother died when I was quite little."

Ella poured out these words half defiantly, half appealingly; and even as she spoke them she glanced anxiously at May Meredith, and felt thankful that the latter was still in an unconscious condition, and so unable to grasp the meaning of the awful declaration Mrs. Greg had just made.

For that it was an awful one to Ella was evident to the excited, unhappy woman who had made it. There was no attempt on Ella's part to disguise the feeling of bitter disappointment, misery, and shame which possessed her on learning that the mother whom she all her life had believed to be dead, and whose virtues and excellences she had been in the habit of vaunting to the disparagement of her stepmother, should turn out to be the erring one after all. There was neither love, sympathy, nor pity in her heart or

in the expression of her face as she pushed herself away from her mother's embrace with the cruel words:

"No, no, no! don't say such a wicked thing. My mother died when I was quite little."

"I have been wrong, wrong all through, terribly wrong now to let the truth, that is so terrible to you, escape me," Mrs. Greg said, more to herself than to her daughter, and Ella winced at the sight of the misery that was painted on the repulsed mother's face, but held herself at arm's length still.

"You have been wrong to tell me such a terrible untruth, you mean," she said, with all the severity of a young judge; "but I will try to forget and forgive the shock you have given me. May, dear! you are better now," she added gently, as Miss Meredith raised her head and stared helplessly about her; "try to stand up, dear, and let us get out of this—this horrible place."

As May staggered to her feet a flood of recollections almost overwhelmed her again, but she struggled against it with sufficient success to be able to say to Mrs. Greg, who seemed to have forgotten her existence:

"I came here under the influence of a delusion, will you believe that? Will you do me the justice of believing that if I had suspected he was a married man, I would rather have died than have let my heart go out to him? Will you believe that I am not a bad girl, Mrs. Greg, only a mistaken one?"

"Oh, it matters very little, I have just had a worse blow than you have given me." Mrs. Greg spoke so mournfully, and looked so reproachfully at Ella as she spoke, that May, glancing hastily from one to the other, was struck afresh by the likeness between them, and had a suspicion of the truth.

"I am sorry, very sorry that you should have more trouble than I have given you unintentionally. I wish I could do *something* to make you happier. Ella," she added impul-

sively, "trust me, tell me what this lady is to you. You are so like her, she might be your——"

"Oh, come away!" Ella interrupted. "*Please* come away, May; I would do anything you asked me to spare you pain and annoyance—come away."

She laid her hand on Miss Meredith's arm as she spoke, and dragged rather than led her to the door. As she passed out she cast one backward glance, and shuddered as her mother opened her arms in a final, pitiful appeal for one sign of love and recognition from her child.

"I can't believe it, I *won't* believe it," she said in response; then she hurried May out, and as they got into the fly and drove off, she said in an explanatory tone:

"I thought that Mrs. Greg was mad when she attacked you so shamefully; I feel sure of it now from something she said when you were fainting."

"What did she say?" May asked, and Ella, thrown off her guard by the abruptness of the question, answered:

"She pretended to be—a—a connection of mine."

"So she is, I am sure; you are so like her you might be her daughter, Ella."

"My mother died when I was quite little, so it's no use her pretending to be *that*," Ella said haughtily.

"Perhaps she didn't die," May observed musingly.

"But she did; how could papa have married again if she didn't?" Ella said decisively. "No, the long and the short of it is that the woman is *mad*, and probably she is no more Mr. Greg's wife than she is my mother."

"Did she say she was your mother?"

"She claimed to be; if she had said she was a relation of my mother's, I might have looked into her claim."

Ella spoke loftily, and tried to look unconcerned. But all the time she was tingling with the deadly fear of there being truth in the madwoman's story.

"Ella, you really ought to find out the truth, whatever it

may be," May said earnestly. "She is no more mad than you and I. She is an unhappy woman—God forgive me for having added to her unhappiness—but she is not mad."

"I know if I were in your place, May, I shouldn't believe that she's Mr. Greg's wife unless I heard it from his own lips. It's only fair to him that you should hear his side of the story. She may be an intriguing woman who is trying to catch him; that I think very likely, and perhaps he may have been bothered into promising to marry her; one often hears of such things. But I don't believe she is Mrs. Greg, and I never want to hear of her again."

Unconsciously May found herself listening to these words with more consideration than she was in the habit of giving to Ella's utterances. She became thoughtful and silent, turning the possibilities which her companion had suggested over and over in her mind until they assumed the air of probabilities. After all, it was more likely that the mistress of the little Norwood cottage should be out of her head sufficiently to labor under delusions concerning her relations with Ted Greg, than that he should have been wicked and foolish enough to play fast and loose with Miss Meredith of Belhaven. Women of that time of life often were subject to delusions about men, she had heard. Very likely he had been kind and attentive to her; he had a kind, attentive manner toward most women! and she had fallen in love with him, and, being a little mad, had persuaded herself that she was his wife. That she should be an imbecile or fool was a far more natural solution of the matter than that he should be an inveterate liar and fraud. Before she got back to the Great Western Hotel May had quite adopted Ella's view of the case, and had made up her mind to do as he had asked her and write to him at his club.

Ella strongly advocated this course. She longed on her own account now to see Mr. Greg, and glean from him,

without committing herself, some information about the woman who dared to claim to be her mother. Strenuously as she denied this claim even to herself, she still had a sneaking desire to have her assurance of its absolute falsity indorsed by someone who knew. If she had allowed herself to credit it, the ground on which she had stood firmly, all her thinking life, would have been ruthlessly cut away from under her feet. Her pride in, and love for herself, her gigantic sense of the superiority of her own mother over her father's second wife, her delightful habit of insulting Mrs. Poynter by innuendo, all these would be shattered and torn away from her, if the woman calling herself Mrs. Greg were not the mad pretender Ella chose to consider her.

Once or twice May Meredith faltered in her determination to write to Ted at the club. But when she spoke of her doubt as to the advisability of doing so to Ella, the latter laughed her scruples to scorn, and jeered at her infirmity of purpose.

"If I loved a man well enough to tumble down in a heap on the floor on merely hearing that he was married, I wouldn't give him up without letting him have a chance of clearing himself. You don't even know that he hasn't written to you. Most likely he has written, and that person has stopped his letters. She would be quite capable of doing it, as she opened and read yours to him. What do you know of her that you should take her word against his, whom you know so well?"

"Perhaps I don't know him well," May said; "yet you're right, Ella. I have no right to think badly of him all in a moment, on the mere word of a stranger."

"Certainly not! If he is to be condemned, don't condemn him without a hearing."

"If I write to him, and he comes, it will be dreadful to have to say to him outright, 'Ted, I have heard a horrible thing; I have been told you're a married man.'"

"Yes, I agree with you, May, it would be a dreadful thing to say it out in that sledge-hammer fashion. If there's no truth in the story he would be justified in feeling enraged with you for having credited it. There are a dozen ways in which you can give him the chance of setting himself straight with you, without being brusque and abrupt."

"It's my nature to be rather brusque, I'm afraid."

"You mustn't be with the man you love. I'm sure Mr. Greg is a very proud man; you'll lose him, if you insult him by accusing him before you give him a chance of explaining."

"I must say something about it when I see him. He will hear that I have been there and know what I have heard, and he will be justified in thinking very badly of me if I take no notice of it."

"Of course you must take notice of it—in a way. But as to his hearing that you have been there, I doubt that. She will keep him in the dark about your visit, if, as I suspect, she has deceived you. How *can* you hesitate and delay about sending for him, May? I should be so impatient to have it over."

"You're right, I had better know the worst or the best as soon as possible. I am wretched and unsettled now; after seeing him I may be wretched still, but at least I shall be settled."

The lines she wrote to him were brief and non-committal. She would not address him again as her "own darling Ted" till she knew that he was so in very truth, nor would she lapse into the rigorous and severe style, and address him as "Dear Mr. Greg," until she knew that he deserved it. So she wrote:

"Not having heard from you as you promised, I write to ask you to come and see me here any time to-morrow.

"Truly yours,

"MAY."

He had left his club when this letter was delivered, and gone home, where he found his wife looking very strange and unlike herself. She said nothing to him about the visitors who had called on him and found her, to their cost. Her heart was too full of bitterness and pain at having been denied and rejected by her own child, for her to rouse herself to the task of telling him that she had undeceived the girl he had misled. The subject of May seemed to her to be of secondary importance now. The girl seemed a good girl, and if she was what she seemed, she would never again make or accept any overtures to or from a married man, now that she knew him to be one. That episode Mrs. Greg regarded as over and done with, and she felt it would be worse than unwise to tickle Ted's vanity by telling him that Miss Meredith had been infatuated enough to follow him to town. Moreover, she could hardly say anything about Miss Meredith without mentioning by whom Miss Meredith had been accompanied, and she shrank from baring the wound her daughter had inflicted on her before the man for whose sake she had deserted, and rendered herself unworthy of that daughter.

It was a fact, too, though Marian Greg hardly realized it yet, that the incident of the morning, instead of making her turn more clingingly and fondly to her husband, had dealt a death-blow to the patient, passionate affection she had hitherto entertained for him. For the first time she felt that he had not been worth the sacrifice she had made for him. From the beginning he had gone after strange goddesses; she admitted to herself now that he had done this, and that she had known it and suffered from it, even while she had still abjectly worshiped and clung to him. But this experience of the light in which her own child regarded her had opened her eyes to the magnitude of her own crime, the fatuousness of her own folly. Now that it was too late, she allowed her reason to tell her the truth. He had never

been worth the sacrifice! Looking at him, as he sat opposite to her at the dinner table, she recognized the truth, instead of averting her mental vision and recoiling from it. He had never been anything but careless and selfish where she was concerned. He had taken her, and broken her, and—tired of her! She knew it all now, and she knew that she had deserved it. What madness had possessed her when she thought the world well lost for love of such a man? He was a splendid looking fellow still, as "goodly to look upon" as when she had eloped with him; but she had never relied upon or honored him, she had only loved him! and all the time he had been loving other women, and winning their love in return. It seemed to her now that it mattered very little whether he still hankered after Miss Meredith or not. But she would not tell him that Miss Meredith had been to seek him out, because that would please and make him vainer than ever.

Her silence and abstraction annoyed him at last, and stung him into saying:

"If you're ill I wish you'd say so, Marian, instead of sitting looking as melancholy and resigned as a monkey at the Zoo."

"I don't feel well, and I do feel melancholy, but I can assure you I am not a bit resigned," she replied wearily.

And he asked:

"What's gone wrong? Has the lodger left without paying his rent, or has the cat broken some of your best crockery? I tell you what it is, Marian, you stay in the house and mope too much. Why don't you go out and see something of your neighbors?"

"Thanks for your suggestion, but my neighbors belong to a class of whom I don't want to see anything. When I go out I prefer going to see those who are poorer and more miserable than myself."

"*That's* your confounded pride. You might have had no

end of friends by this time if you hadn't always been so stand off the grass with people."

"It never occurred to you to introduce me to any of your own friends—of the set you were in before you were married to me," she said, looking him full in the face.

"You were so sensitive at first, that if they hadn't rushed into your arms, you would have thought they were slighting you. And then after a time I got out of the way of thinking about it, and now it would be devilish awkward to do it as you've kept in the background so long."

"Don't think that I am blaming or reproaching you. I have felt my place to be in the background since I became the fatal means of blighting your life and my own."

"What has come over you?" he asked wonderingly, for this was the first time he had ever heard her speak remorsefully.

"The feeling that the beginning of the end has come," she sobbed hysterically, and he let the subject drop.

CHAPTER XXI.

WITH THE STREAM.

"I WILL call on you at four."

This was the telegram May Meredith received from Mr. Greg in reply to her note on the following morning, and when she read it aloud to Ella, the latter said:

"It will be better for you to get it over with him alone; however things go, it will be embarrassing for both of you to have me present, so I shall take the opportunity of going home and packing up some more of my things."

In spite of her strongly, almost fiercely avowed disbelief in the truth of Mrs. Greg's statement that she was Ella's mother, the girl was compelled to feel that Mrs. Poynter

was a less faulty woman than in her filial jealousy she (Ella) had always thought her to be. But if Mrs. Poynter were proved to be the most virtuous of her sex, if she were as absolutely above suspicion as Cæsar's wife was expected to be, Ella knew that she would never like "that woman," as she called her, one whit the better than she had done hitherto.

For "that woman" had committed the unpardonable sin of having taking unto herself the man whom the girl had idealized into the part of *the* one man in the world to be coveted. If Guy St. Austle could only be brought to see the error of his ways, if he could only be persuaded to pursue the manlier course, which Ella was quite ready to show him, of preferring herself to time-worn Mrs. Poynter, then the latter might go down to her grave unharassed and unhated by Ella. But if "he persisted in his pernicious fidelity to that poisonous woman," then Ella felt that she would readily and willingly wreck them both if possible.

Meantime she went back to her stepmother's house armed, as she imagined, at all points against gratifying any curiosity Mrs. Poynter might express as to where she (Ella) had been, and whom she had seen while she had been May Meredith's guest; while May remained at the hotel in a state of alternate longing for and dread of the appearance of the loved but suspected one.

For in spite of the hope against hope phase of feeling into which she had worked herself up, in spite of Ella's sophistries, in spite of the vivid recollection she had of Ted's essentially manly and candid appearance and expression, May did suffer from the gnawing pangs of jealous suspicion. She had just made the firm resolution that as soon as she saw him she would extort the truth and the whole truth from him, when he was announced; and before she could carry her resolution into force, she found herself in *his arms* and felt his kisses raining down upon her face.

He was a scoundrel for acting so, and he knew himself to be one, and he was a greater scoundrel for trying to excuse himself in his own eyes by telling himself that the girl had brought this fresh unhappy complication upon herself. If she had not followed him and sent for him and met him with a look of love that would have subjugated an anchorite, he wouldn't have been blackguard enough to embrace and kiss her, he declared to himself. Even as it was he thought he was behaving rather well in releasing her quickly and saying in a cool, unembarrassed way:

"Who on earth would have thought of seeing you up here? What an erratic little woman it is, to be sure!"

"It's the first time I have left Belhaven for six years. I scarcely deserve to be described as erratic."

She spoke gravely, as if she were rather hurt, which in fact she was. He felt his position was becoming uncomfortable, not to say untenable.

"Why haven't you answered my letter?" she went on eproachfully; "it was wrong of you, it was cruel of you, ed, to leave such a letter unanswered."

"I did answer it. You won't understand that when a fel- is hanging between fortune and ruin he is disposed to private matters slide; that is, if he has firm reliance—as I e—on the one who shares the private matter with him."

"I wish I could *quite* believe that you were *quite* in earnest, l," she said uneasily. "When you left me you seemed ng to believe that I, and Belhaven, and all else that I , was yours as much as mine. What has changed you? do you speak of 'hanging between fortune and ruin,' all that I have is yours?"

her thorough out and out way she had cast all thought "dreadful woman" who had proclaimed herself to be e away from her. "The idle raging of a stranger her own knowledge of Ted!" It could not hold out! *not be credited for* a moment longer! May began to

be ashamed of herself for having listened to it at all, as she let her eyes linger lovingly on the attractive outward shell of what she believed to be a spirit that was almost bright in its brave manliness.

"I can't be mean enough to take all you have to give without being able to offer a fair equivalent," he said with a grand, magnanimous pride dashed with an humble air that was pleasing, though a trifle perplexing to the girl, who was unprepared for this change of front.

"I don't understand," she said slowly. "I thought when you said good-by to me at Belhaven that you understood as well as I did that there was nothing needed on your side but *you!* Now, you don't seem to understand this! or is it that I don't understand *you?*"

He attempted to smile, but the attempt was a failure. He was beginning to realize that this unfortunate affair could not be cast into the limbo of forgotten and blotted-out bothers. He would not be permitted to tread a primrose path to freedom from May's claim upon his heart and chivalry, with no further responsibility concerning her, without proclaiming himself the rascal he was. He shrank from exposing himself as a rascal before Miss Meredith, but if in her unsuspicious love and loyalty she drove him into a corner, there would be nothing left for him to do but to rudely rend the veil which concealed his real self from her eyes.

"Why don't you speak?" she asked impatiently. She was in a highly strained condition, and the silence was becoming intolerable to her.

"I can't offer you a full explanation of my appearing to lag and not to fully reciprocate your sweet, womanly thoughtfulness and generosity," he said hesitatingly.

"'Thoughtfulness and generosity'—those are cold words to express what I feel for you, Ted."

She put her hand out and rested it on the back of a chair as she spoke. All the horrible misery and dread which the

words of the mistress of the Norwood cottage had aroused in her mind rushed back upon her now, causing her brain to reel and her limbs to shiver. The sight of her emotion, of the pain of doubting him, which was struggling with her loving trust in him, stung him to injudicious tenderness again. Unstable as water, it was not in him to be true to either woman when out of her presence. So now, in sight of May's anguish, he cast fidelity to his wife to the winds.

"It's no use. I have tried to be prudent and keep away from you for your own sake, and now that I see you again poor prudence hasn't a chance of being listened to. May, I wish to God I were a better fellow for your sake, but such as I am I *can't* ask you not to care for me any longer; I can't be brave enough to ask you to forgive and forget me."

"Why should I do anything so utterly unreasonable and unpleasant?" she asked, restored to smiles and happiness at once. "If you have been unlucky or reckless about money all the more need for you to have the right to use mine as soon as possible. Ted, I believe you have been hearing tales against me? People who don't like me always say I have been my own mistress too long ever to be a good wife——"

"If the whole world spoke against you, I wouldn't believe it," he interrupted eagerly.

"No! nor will I ever let myself be made miserable by a word or a hint about you. Our faith in each other is and always shall be absolute."

She glowed into beauty almost as she spoke, and he felt weaker than ever! How, after this exquisite confession of faith in him, could he ever tell her that he had a wife living, who loved him and whom he professed to love?

No inspiration came to help him with an answer to this question. So he set it aside for a time and gave himself up to the present indulgence of a long happy talk with May,

during which she settled their future comfortably, and he acquiesced in her arrangements.

"And now, having cleared away the clouds that were between us, I shall go back to Belhaven to-morrow. When will you be able to come, Ted?"

He was on the brink of taking his leave when she asked him this question, which he had been dreading the whole time.

"I may be able to run down in about a fortnight, or I may be kept three weeks."

"What keeps you, dear?" She clasped her hands over his shoulder and rested her chin upon them, and he could not meet her eyes—their clear, steady light seemed to scorch him.

"What keeps me? Half a hundred matters that you wouldn't understand."

"Shall I not understand them when we are married?"

"It will be different, then," he said evasively, and the girl sighed and let her hands drop from his shoulder.

"Don't send me away with a sigh, May," he said falteringly, catching her hand and bending his face down toward her, but she kept her face downcast still! He had damped her by his evident reluctance to let her share his confidence.

"You will come to-morrow to see me off, won't you?"

"Of course I will! so this is not farewell, but only *au revoir*," he said gayly; and then she let him go. But though she was to see him the next morning, and though he had promised to follow her to Belhaven in three weeks at the latest, she felt dreadfully depressed.

She looked round the dull private sitting room wistfully, unconsciously noting every article of furniture in it. She told herself that she was very happy in her restored trust in her lover, and in the prospect of so soon having him again. But at the same time she felt that the ghosts of the objects by which she was surrounded, and which were being indel-

ibly imprinted on her memory, would start up to taunt and haunt her at some future period of pain.

"Shall I be happy or wretched, blest or cursed, hopeful or hopeless, when I pay my next visit to London?" she thought, as she cast herself down on one of the saddle-back sofas, and tried to rest and stop the throbbing of her pulses before Ella came back. And when Ella came back, what, after all, had she (May) to tell beyond the bare fact that Ted had been to see her, and been affectionate and a trifle abstracted?

Now that he was out of her sight, she felt a fainter reliance on his promise to come down to Cornwall in about three weeks, and she felt an even fainter one on his making practical arrangements for their marriage, when he did come. He had assented to all those propositions of hers which bore upon and forwarded the great step! But she recalled now that he had merely assented, and that she had been the only one to propose. A wave of indignation swept over her soul as she remembered this. It was not generous or thoughtful of him to leave everything to her—a girl who had neither father nor mother, brothers nor sisters, to espouse her cause and save her trouble! Perhaps it was, after all, only that he felt her to be so capable, so well able to take care of herself, that he refrained from taking the initiative. The possibility of this being the case was so soothing that she was quite able to meet Ella with a fair-weather face, and the assurance that everything "was right, quite right, between Ted and herself!"

In spite, however, of the fair-weather face and the assurance, Ella felt pretty sure that Mr. Greg was worse than even she thought him, if he ever voluntarily crossed May's path again.

For a revelation had been made to her this day, or, rather, this day she had succeeded in extracting a statement from her stepmother, which, at first, had crushed her with shame

and agony, and afterward engendered such spite and bitterness toward most of her fellow-creatures as to be almost unnatural and altogether unscrupulous.

The girl had been primed with the intention of getting full information concerning her dead mother from Mrs. Poynter, without betraying to the latter that she (Ella) had the faintest suspicion of her mother's fate being other than it had always been represented to her to be, namely, a brief life of married happiness and an early death. But in her eagerness and excitement she tripped in her carefully prearranged speech, and instead of saying: "Did you know anything of Mrs. Greg when you married my father?" she asked: "Do you think my mother ever knew that Mr. Greg we met at Trelyn Towers?" She could not keep a tremor of anxiety and pain out of her voice as she asked this, and in a moment all the womanly tenderness that was rarely dormant in Mrs. Poynter's nature woke up.

"My dear child, who has been cruel enough to prompt you to ask such a question? Let Mr. Greg and everything connected with him be blotted out from your memory. He is not a good friend for either woman or girl. Forget that you ever knew him."

"I'm not likely to be able to forget that, for he is going to be married to my friend, May Meredith; but a terrible woman, who *must* be mad, told May and me yesterday, when we went to look him up at his lodgings, that she was his wife and my mother. Preposterous, wasn't it?"

Ella spoke the last sentence with jaunty uneasiness, for Mrs. Poynter had covered her face with her hands. It must all come out now, she knew. The sad secret which had only been made known to her after her own marriage, the story of the discovery, and divorce, and disgrace, must all be made known, not only to the innocent child, but to Guy St. Austle. And he, with his high code of morality,

with his prejudice against marrying a woman who had been another man's wife, what would he think of her now? He would regard her union with the husband of the divorced woman as illegal, as unsanctioned either by God or the law. Still, she would not secure her own happiness at the cost of any further lying or deception.

"Your mother was unhappy enough to meet Mr. Greg after she married your father. She was very young. Think *very* gently of her, Ella. She has been very heavily punished. You, her only child, were taken from her, and now it seems that the man for whom she sacrificed herself is false to her."

Ella held her white face up as proudly as ever, but her eyes flashed like angry stars, and her lips trembled.

"She is my mother, then?"

"She is your mother. I vowed that I would keep all knowledge of her from you; your father made me do it, but I was wrong. She *is* your mother, and all these years she has been deprived of her daughter's love. You must make up to her for these lost years now, Ella; you must give her all the love that has been withheld from her all this time."

"Does Mr. St. Austle know anything about this?" Ella asked coldly

"He knows nothing—yet."

"I know what his views are," Ella cried triumphantly. "He will think worse of you than he will of me——"

"Ella, he will never think badly of you, or hardly of your poor mother. Don't be so bitter, my poor child!"

"But he holds that those whom God has joined together man may not put asunder—I know he does. He will look on my mother as my father's wife still; so what will he think of you? You had better let things go on as they are, and keep the secret still."

"May all the misery that may come for having kept it so

can't despise you any longer."

Her voice had risen higher and h
of this vicious tirade. The last wo
than spoken, for the poor willful girl
sobs that were almost choking her.
with rage and shame, Guy St. Aust
in an angry and astonished tone:

"What is the meaning of this?
to Mrs. Poynter, who has been like
insulting and cruel way, Ella?"

"Like a mother to me!" the gi
"How I wish I had never had a moth
floods of tears burst out, and she cr
over.

CHAPTER X

ROBERT'S RETU

It was within ten minutes of the

out seeing her that outraged love and pride would induce May to break with him definitely, and so spare Ella the necessity of exposing his perfidy and her mother's dishonor. She shrank from the thought of doing this with a feeling of smarting shame that was cruelly hard to bear. But sharp and severe as the strain was, the girl bore up under it with outward composure that would have been heroic had the feeling that prompted it been more filial. Her one desire now was to get away to a place where no one knew or even suspected her secret. In London she would always be liable to meet either Mrs. Poynter or Guy St. Austle, however sedulously she avoided their home and their haunts. But down at Belhaven no one knew anything about her that would justify them in either looking down upon, or pitying her. Pity was as obnoxious to her as contempt, in her young, arrogant, hard frame of mind. So she panted to be off to a place where nothing was known that could cause either feeling, and prayed that the time would fly faster, as earnestly as May did that it would stand still till *he* came.

The inevitable moment for starting arrived, and there was no Ted to speed her on her way with words and looks of love. They had a carriage to themselves fortunately, for when the train had fairly started May could not any longer bear her pain and mortification in silence. The tears came up and dimmed her last view of the platform, and as they steamed out of the station she bared her wound.

"How can he have been so cruel as to let me go without seeing me again?" she asked mournfully, and Ella, whose most earnest current aspiration was that neither she nor May might ever cast eyes on or hear of the man who had ruined her mother's life again, said decisively:

"He is cruel, as you say, cruel and heartlessly insulting. I hope you will never give another thought to him, May. I hope he will die before he ever tries to come near you again."

"You took a very different view of his conduct yesterday," May said wonderingly. "You begged me then to trust him, and be deaf to everything that I might hear against him. You're not consistent."

"Yesterday he hadn't treated you with indifference and contempt to my knowledge. To-day he has done so; he couldn't show you more plainly that he doesn't love you, and doesn't want you, than he has done this morning."

"I feel that."

"Then throw all thought of and kind feeling for him away. Don't be such a *soft* as to go on caring for a man who seems to take delight in showing that he doesn't care for you."

"Don't, don't," poor May cried, putting up her hands as if to avert a blow. "You don't know what this is to me—you don't know how he has seemed to love me—you don't know how he has *said* he loves me. I can't think that it's all over—that he has gone out of my life, that he's not *my* Ted any longer—yet."

"He's done his best to make you feel it," Ella said, with the philosophical fortitude one girl is apt to display about the love troubles of another.

"He must be ill, or some accident must have happened to him," May said piteously, then instantly she added remorsefully:

"There's no comfort in that thought, though. I'd rather bear anything than that he should be ill or suffering."

"If a man served me such a shabby trick I should wish him every evil under the sun," Ella said, thinking spitefully of Guy St. Austle as she spoke. "I should wish him to marry a wife who would bore him to death in a week, and make his home unhappy; I should wish everything he undertook to fail——"

"Not if you loved him," May interrupted, "you'd wish *him, as I do* Ted, every blessing under the sun. It would

hurt me more than I am hurt already if I thought he wasn't happy."

"If I were like you, going to a beautiful home and beautiful horses and dogs, all of my very own, with no one to interfere with me in any way, I'd never give a thought to a man even if he worshiped me; and as for wasting a bit of feeling on one who didn't, I should as soon think of cutting my throat. Do be happy, you lucky girl, you have everything to make you so. No relations to worry you——"

"No, I am terribly alone in the world, and yesterday I seemed to have everything," May said sadly, but Ella's words bore a certain sort of fruit. For the remainder of the journey May did try to think and speak about Belhaven, and to Ella's intense relief did refrain from further mention of her fickle and forgetful lover.

The following day's post did not bring her what she had ardently hoped for—if not confidently expected—a letter, namely, from Mr. Greg, explaining his conduct. What misery the non-fulfillment of her hope caused the girl, no one but herself knew. She spent the evening alone, locked in her bedroom, and when she met Ella at breakfast the next morning, there were signs of such suffering on her face as are caused sometimes by witnessing the death throes of someone most dearly loved, and Ella understood that the subject of May's false love was not to be mentioned between them.

For a week May busied herself within the limits of her own house and grounds. At the end of that time she proposed driving over to Trelyn Towers, and after that she resumed all her former occupations and habits, and life flowed on at Belhaven as if Ted Greg had never been there to disturb its current.

There was a little uneasiness mixed with the pleasure with which the St. Austles welcomed back their formerly buoyant-

natured young neighbor. They were too well bred, as well as too kind hearted, to express curiosity as to what had taken her up to town so suddenly, and what had sent her home in so subdued a mood. But in their own minds they both felt that Ted Greg had more to do with the suddenness of the movement, and the sadness of the mood, than met the eye. She never mentioned their late guest herself, and intuition taught them he was a topic better avoided. So his name remained unspoken in her hearing for so long a time that at last she hungered for the sound of it, in order to test, by her sensations, whether she had reached that stage of almost stony endurance which she had set herself to attain.

That he was rarely absent from her thoughts during her waking hours was painfully true. She could not control herself to cease from conjecturing what it was that had made him play her false. That he was, if not married to, at the least, very seriously entangled with the woman who had proclaimed herself his wife on the occasion of May's visit to the Norwood cottage, the latter could no longer doubt. But why had he been brutal enough to win her heart, pose as a free man, and bring the awful disgrace upon her of having loved a married man? Why had he been deceitful in his desperate wickedness up to the very last, the last fatally, frantically, degradingly happy day, when he had come to the hotel and embraced her in a way that made her shudder now as she thought of it.

She could not help conjecturing continually why he had done these things, any more than she could be blind to the phantasmagorial semblance of his face and form, which would unceasingly rise up and blot out everything else from her sight. When she had been perfectly happy in her belief in being honorably engaged to him, it had annoyed her sometimes that she could not, at her heart's will, conjure up a vision of him as he had looked under certain conditions,

that had been peculiarly becoming to him in her eyes. But now that she had lost him forever, he was constantly recurring vividly in his habit, as he lived, and with all that had most attracted her in his expression strongly depicted. A thousand times, when she was striving to absorb herself in the excitements of a hunting day, she would see him going with dashing steadiness at the stiffest bit in the fence in front of her, and sailing over it with exquisite skill. If she could only have seen him at home for a few days, perhaps he would not have been so glorified in her after thoughts and visions of him! But this was a spectacle she had been spared hitherto, and so she could neither forget, despise, nor become indifferent to the vivid presentment which her memory gave of him.

The prospect of lapsing into a state of lonely old maidenhood had no terrors for May Meredith. It rarely has for girls who are well endowed with this world's goods. But the idea of never seeing Ted Greg again, save in some casual, cool, and constrained way, made her sick. She knew that seeing him would only set bleeding afresh those wounds of disappointment, mortification, and love that was still dear. She knew that if she experienced one throb of pleasure at the sight of him, she would be as weak as she was wicked. And yet, oh! how desperately she did long to see Ted again, against all the dictates of prudence, reason, and propriety—against even the certain knowledge she had that a meeting with him would only intensify the misery she was already enduring.

She had one solitary little bit of comfort, she knew that if there were gossipings and speculations about her none of them would reach her ears. She had been a bird of freedom so long that now, when she had been winged, there was no one sufficiently audacious in the circle of her acquaintances and friends to tell her that her wound had been observed. But one day, when she dropped in to after-

noon tea with Lady St. Austle, an unconscious hand probed the wound deeply.

She found quite a little family party assembled in Laura's drawing room : Mrs. Robert Davis and her children in an effervescent and jubilant state, for which she was at a loss to account until Lady St. Austle explained the situation to her.

"We are having a gala day among ourselves. My brother, Mr. Davis—perhaps you may have heard how terribly he was treated and how *fearfully* he has suffered through unscrupulous speculators—has had his affairs righted."

"You should say that he has righted them himself, Laura," Mrs. Robert Davis interposed with fussy loyalty. "No one can tell how he has struggled and sacrificed himself, Miss Meredith, living away from all his home comforts in nasty common lodgings, separated from his wife and children, and with such an *undeserved* stigma on his name. I consider he has been heroic, and now Laura speaks of his affairs 'having been righted,' as if someone else had done it for him."

"Well, they are righted," Laura said with patient sweetness, though she had been considerably curtailed in many of her justifiable expenditures lately in order that, at her entreaties, her husband should advance "just one more thou' to poor Robert"; "and he's coming down to stay with us for a few days, and when he goes away, I'm thinking half my occupation will be gone, for Anna and the children will want to go with him, and I shall have no more pleasant looking after them duty to do."

"My dear Laura, you could not expect, you could not even hope, that you would always have us at your gates to fall back upon during your hours of idleness."

"I'm certain if I had been Lady St. Austle, I should never have hoped it, whatever I might have expected," May put in sharply, but Mrs. Davis's mental hide was unpenetrated by the sting.

"Naturally you wouldn't," she said with complacent graciousness. "My husband has the first claim on me, and Laura must, in parting with us, make a sacrifice to her brother in return for all he has sacrificed for her. *Such* a wedding as he gave her, Miss Meredith! *You*, living down here in your pretty, retired little place, can have no conception of the scale on which it was done. I don't think we shall return to Norwood," she added loftily to Laura, and Laura, with a conscience void of all intention of giving offense, replied hastily:

"Oh, no, I hope not, Anna; it would be too horrid for you to go back and live in a humble way in a neighborhood where you had such a jolly house and establishment, and—and I don't think Walter would help you any longer if you did it," she added timidly.

"Walter help us!" Mrs. Robert Davis repeated with fine scorn. "You will find, when your brother comes, that he will not rely much on Sir Walter St. Austle's help. Oh, he's been very kind, and so have you, Laura, to me and the children; glad you must be to feel that you've been able to make any return at all for all the years you lived with us, but when Robert comes you'll find——"

"Mr. Davis," the butler announced, and May Meredith saw a furtive eyed, fugitive mannered, self-conscious man come in with a hurried, deprecatory air that repelled her at once.

But sweet Lady St. Austle gave him a warm, welcoming, sisterly kiss, and his wife hailed him as if he had been the lost tribes of Israel, and she were the explorer who would receive the blue ribbon of the Exploration Society for having found them. So May did not escape at once, as instinct warned her to do.

"Surely I have seen this young lady before!" he said presently, when the family embracings and gratulations had ceased for a time. He stared hard at Miss Mere-

dith, and a vague sensation of uneasiness beset her at once.

"I can't recall having had the pleasure of meeting you," she said, giving a little gulp over the polite part of her speech.

"It wasn't exactly a 'meeting'; fact is, I saw you from the parlor window of my lodgings in Norwood; you came with Miss Poynter one day to call on Mrs. Greg, or rather I should say on Mr. Greg, for the servant told me you asked for him. By the way, Laura, Walter knows Greg, I understand; he's been staying here, he tells me. An uncommonly fine looking, nice fellow he is, too."

"But our Mr. Greg isn't a married man——" Lady St. Austle was beginning uneasily, when her brother interrupted her with a coarse laugh.

"He's a very much married man, my dear Laura, only the lady always keeps very much in the background, though why she should do so, I'm sure I can't conceive, for she's a perfect lady, and a very handsome woman into the bargain. Miss Meredith will bear me up in saying this, I'm sure."

"And I'm sure we don't want to hear anything about Mrs. Greg or Mrs. Anybody Else, and you only just come back to us, Robert," his wife interposed, with a mixture of jealousy and affection for which May was inclined to hurl blessings at her head, as it diverted attention from the place in Mr. Davis' narrative which he had forced her (May) to occupy. Under cover of the fatuous denials which he poured forth as to his ever having "looked at any other woman since parting with his Anna," May made her escape, without being called in a friendly way to account for her suppressed knowledge of and visit to Mrs. Greg.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW NET.

WHEN Ella had stormily departed from Mrs. Poynter's borders that day there was a very full explanation between that lady and her lover. As compassionately as she could, Mabel told the story of her predecessor's decline and fall, and as patiently as he could, Guy St. Austle listened to it.

"This was the reason of my holding aloof from you all those years, Guy. I knew it went sorely against the grain with you, that you should be in love with a widow. That I should be the widow of a man whose first wife was still alive, would shock you too much, I feared."

"I would rather it hadn't been the case," he admitted, and the admission stung her.

"As it is the case, perhaps you would like to be released," she said quietly, but the tears that had been in her eyes a moment before were dried by the heat of the blood that rushed up to her face in a wave of hurt feeling.

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips.

"We belong to each other now, Mabel; we must accept and endure each other's errors of judgment and of action."

"I felt that you would regard my having been the wife of a man whose divorced wife was still alive as an unpardonable sin. I regarded it as one myself when first I knew it."

"You didn't know it until it was too late to draw back——"

"Too late to draw back? Why, Guy, I didn't know it till I had been married more than a year."

"Then it's a mere shadow which has stood between us," he cried heartily. "What you did in ignorance was neither sin, fault, nor folly. My own darling Mabel, how could I have been such a fool as to suppose anything else for a

moment? But what a lot of time we have wasted, because you hadn't the courage to tell me all this five years ago."

"And I've kept the secret to no effect after all, for Ella has been cruelly enlightened by the very one who ought to have spared the poor child. And yet, Guy, I can't help feeling so bitterly sorry for poor Mrs. Greg. To have her own child shrink from her, and disown her. It's too hideously unnatural. I would give a great deal to be able to do something to comfort her, poor woman!"

"It's a case that doesn't admit of much comfort, I'm afraid. Greg is hardly the fellow for whom the world is well lost by a woman. The very fact of his swaggering about at such houses as Trelyn while she's left out in the cold in a cottage at Norwood, shows that he has no consideration for her. His passion has spent its novel force, and the poor victim of it is left half her time in solitude to reflect on her own imbecility. I tell you what we must do, though, Mabel; we must put Walter and Laura on their guard against Greg. He mustn't be let go on making love to May Meredith."

"Don't interfere, Ella will put May Meredith on her guard. Don't make it more public than is needful," Mrs. Poynter pleaded. "I am sure we may rely on Mr. Greg's aversion to trouble and annoyance for keeping him away from Trelyn. His wife will have told him that she has recognized her daughter, and he will put two and two together, and find it pleasanter to keep out of your way and mine. Walter and Laura needn't know anything of the story in which I am mixed up, to my sorrow and regret."

"I don't like concealments," Guy said, shaking his head dubiously; but as he even more disliked the idea of Mabel's share in the drama becoming known to his own family, he consented to become accessory to one for once.

"Besides," he said in reply to his own conscience, which pricked him a bit in the matter, "it would be ghastly humil-

iating for poor May to have it known in her own neighborhood that she has been made such a fool of. And Walter can never hold his tongue. Mabel is distinctly right. We owe it to May to give as little publicity to the unfortunate affair as possible."

Having arrived at this convenient conclusion and abided by it, he was rather annoyed and surprised some time after at getting a letter from his brother, in which the latter said:

"Robert Davis has turned up here fat and well liking, and rather disposed to think that we ought all to do our level best, daily and hourly, to indemnify him for some trifling disagreeables he experienced, while he was playing hide-and-seek, after having defrauded everyone. He has made a pile again, and, thank God, he and his tribe are going to America, to wallow in splendor under a new name, I presume. He gives us the intelligence that Ted Greg has a wife. I suppose poor Ted married beneath him in his salad days, as the lady is kept completely in the background. Love to your wife; I am sorry to say Laura is not very well, and as there is scarlet fever about I'm a bit uneasy.

"Your affectionate brother,

"WALTER."

This letter was received by the happy pair while they were spending their honeymoon soberly in the Ardennes, where Guy was laying the scene of a romantic drama of modern French country life and Mabel was realizing the truth that there is very little romance in real life after the early glow of youth is past.

"I could be *almost* happy again if that dreadful Mr. Davis would go away forever," May Meredith would constantly say to herself, after having been brought into forced contact with the gentleman in question. With what seemed to her like brutal maliciousness, he would refer to "that

occasion when he had caught a glimpse of her through the parlor window," or dwell with bated breath, for fear his wife should hear him, on Mrs. Greg's fine figure and good looks. In reality there was neither brutality nor malice in these reminiscences. Only Mr. Davis loved to talk of himself in these days, to make up for the long spell of verbal discretion he had been obliged to observe while at the Norwood cottage. It did not occur to him that anyone could be uninterested in anything that interested him, and Mrs. Greg, with her saddened beauty and singularly dull and unsocial life, had interested him greatly.

"Have you any idea who she was?" he asked May one Sunday, when the whole party—St. Austles, Davises, Ella, and herself—were walking back from church to lunch at Trelyn Towers.

"I have never speculated about her. I never heard of her before that day, and I've never heard of her since. And now, Mr. Davis, as you have forced the subject on me again, I will tell you plainly I would rather not discuss it."

"Painful, is it? I'm sorry to have offended you, but——"

"Not painful, only tedious," May interrupted. "Can't you understand that one of one's most unimportant little actions becomes a scourge, if it's perpetually being picked up and hurled at one?"

"You needn't be afraid, I won't say anything before them," he said, lowering his voice mysteriously, and jerking his thumb backward over his shoulder to indicate the ones he referred to. "Greg isn't the only man who knows a pretty girl when he sees one; I don't blame him! I've an eye for beauty myself, but mum's the word about that before Anna, and mum shall be the word about the Gregs before the others, now that I know."

He only meant to be jocular after the fashion of an underbred man, but the assumption of being in her confidence, and the leering look of odious familiarity punished poor May

sufficiently for the unintentional sin she had committed in loving her neighbor's husband before she knew him to be such. Angry, defiant, disdainful words rose to her lips, but she dared not let them be spoken, she dared not defy this man, whom she despised, to insinuate his worst and lower her in the eyes of her old friends. She was being made to come off her pedestal for Ted Greg's unworthy sake, and no mistake.

After this, being idle to a certain extent now, and being egotistical always, Davis fell into the habit of calling frequently on Miss Meredith, assuming that he and she had sympathies and sufferings in common. He did not exactly say so, but he implied that he had been extremely efficacious in consoling Mrs. Greg during her husband's frequent absences. He would dwell at length on the fastidious care Mrs. Greg had always bestowed upon the preparation of his food, and would then sigh in a way that May felt was intended to show her how deeply he deplored that his Anna should look like a cook and still be unable to rise to those scientific heights of cookery that Mrs. Greg had scaled so easily. He would sink his voice to a whisper if Ella came into the room, when he was blunderingly torturing Miss Meredith, and change the subject with a palpable and elaborate effort that naturally made Ella think they had been discussing her unfavorably.

"How can you endure that talkative, gossiping, podgy man?" Ella said one day when the palpable and elaborate effort had been more than usually pronounced.

"I want to keep him in a good temper while he's here—the beast!" May said, beginning her sentence abjectly, and finishing it furiously.

"But why should you want to keep him in a good temper, wherever he is?" Ella said, with the injudicious curiosity that generally reaps a slap in the face for the one who has betrayed it.

"Why? because, if you will know, he saw me that unlucky day I called at the cottage in Norwood, where my happiness and pride were battered down and trampled in the dust!" May answered, with unusual vehemence. Whereupon Ella shrugged her shoulders after the manner of one who desires to dismiss a subject, and said carelessly:

"Those Gregs are a couple of impostors. I never told you before, but I find from my stepmother, Mrs. St. Austle, that handsome Ted Greg, as he is called, really is the husband of the woman we saw there."

"The lady who said she was your mother?" May inquired.

Ella's mobile face grew fiery and fierce in a moment.

"We mean the same person," she said dryly. "Why should you hurt my feelings by reminding me of her false pretenses?"

"I didn't intend doing anything so meanly vindictive!" May retorted warmly. "Only, Ella, if you knew what it was to smart under such a cruel insult as Mr. Greg has put upon me, you would understand my marveling at your rejection of a mother's claims before you had inquired into them. If I had a mother to turn to and love now, I shouldn't ask what place she had come from, or why she had neglected me so long. I should pray for her love and sympathy, and give her mine *so* fully."

"So would I, if I didn't happen to have known all my life that my real mother died when I was a baby," Ella said obstinately.

"Did she die—are you sure of that?" May persisted. "Ella, I have heard things about Mrs. Greg from this obnoxious man, Mr. Davis, that convince me she is no commonplace woman, neglected by her husband because he is repenting himself of having married beneath him. She is *a lady* with a sad story, I'm sure. Do inquire into that story, Ella, and relieve her sadness if you can!"

"I have no vocation for playing the part of comforter to women who have made fools of themselves for the sake of a handsome face and a selfishly debonair manner," Ella said defiantly, and May felt that she was being included in the class whom Ella declared she had no intention of befriending. A less generous nature than May's would have resented this, but when Ella was most unbearable in her arrogance and heartlessness, Miss Meredith never forgot that the motherless girl had claims upon her which only another motherless girl could fully understand and respond to. So the subject being a sore one between them, May suffered it to drop again till the smart of it should cease.

Very shortly a fresh impetus was given to interests that centered nearer home. The fever, which had been virulent for some time in the lowest and least sanitary localities in the neighborhood, had crept upward and stricken Lady St. Austle, and in a moment of thoughtlessness, her distressed husband came down to speak of his sorrows and anxieties to his two girl friends at Belhaven. When he had been there once, there could be no danger to them in his coming again, they both argued. Accordingly, against his better judgment and sense of what was right and prudent, he would carry the latest bulletins of poor Laura's state to them in person, always providing that they should meet him in the open air, and pathetically refusing to shake hands with them at meeting or parting.

After a time Lady St. Austle's state became critical, and then Walter glued himself to the house in which she was lying in a state of delirium, or to the terraces immediately around it. No more personally conveyed bulletins to Belhaven now; only a few words, four or five times a day, scratched on a scrap of paper, and read by Ella before it had been fumigated according to scientific principles. At first there was merely a feeling of true womanly anxiety bubbling up in Ella's heart to hear how the suffering woman

was, and making her regardless of precautions and careless of consequences. But after a brief while Ella became conscious that there was the exaltation of a sensation of heroism in her action. To know that she was the chosen repository daily of this man's desperately loving fears and anxious dreads regarding his beautiful wife, made the girl, who had been slighted by the man's less important brother, feel of more consequence in her own eyes than she had felt since Guy St. Austle had rebuffed her. This knowledge intensified and deepened her satisfaction in being near to "poor Sir Walter," when he gave her to understand that unless she gave him the one gleam of light, which a note of sympathy from her would send through the dark clouds of misery, uncertainty, and anxiety which encompassed him, those clouds would envelope and destroy him utterly. How after this could she refuse to receive and respond to those poisonous little scraps of paper which carried the germs of the disease to hitherto undefiled and unaffected Belhaven?

Perhaps she never asked the question, how she could refrain from doing this, from anyone. Perhaps had she done so, and had the reply been antagonistic to her desires, she would have disregarded the advice. Perhaps she never gave a thought to anyone or anything saving the man who was turning to her for solace in the midst of his great distress. At any rate her whole nature softened and grew more tender and more true in these days, and the thought that she was being of use and comfort to him in his grave trouble made her braver, better, and more buoyant than she had ever been before. For the first time she was of *use* to someone. Her stepmother had tried always to have been of use to her (Ella), and had failed in being so through the girl's own perversity. May Meredith had been more than a sister in kindness and consideration, but Ella had failed to discern that she could give anything in return to this friend, *who seemed* to want nothing of her, and who was so well

endowed with worldly goods. While, as for the throng of acquaintance and so-called friends by whom she had been surrounded in "society," there had never been time for her to give a thought to their needs, and even had she done so she would, in her artificial selfishness, have questioned why she should be called upon or be expected to supply them.

Therefore it was like water to a dry land, when her arid little heart discovered that it could pour balm into the strained, hot, anxious one of Sir Walter St. Austle. She had literally no ulterior views. She scarcely looked beyond the hour at which her sympathetic letters or presence solaced him. She would have recoiled in horror from herself if the idea of Lady St. Austle's death, and any possible benefits accruing to herself from it, had occurred to her. And yet! and yet whenever she looked beyond the time in which he could be with her constantly, it was all black darkness and utter desolation.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I CAN'T GRIEVE."

"TAKE a turn in the garden with me, Ella; I have awful news to tell you!"

Sir Walter St. Austle, pale and haggard in face, and distressingly distraught in manner, startled Ella by appearing abruptly before the open window at which she was sitting painting a miniature of, and thinking about him.

"Awful news, Walter! What is it?" She was out on the broad walk in front of the house, and had caught hold of his arm, for his steps were flagging.

"They have given Laura up," he said, dropping his face into his hands, and shaking her off by the action. "They say my wife must die."

Against her will, against her sense of right, against her delicacy, the words formed themselves :

" I *can't* grieve."

He heard, but scarcely understood the import of her words, and went on as if she had not spoken :

" It's an awful blow, a frightful calamity to fall upon a fellow ! She's so beautiful and happy ! Why couldn't she have been spared ? It's too ghastly to be true, isn't it ? "

" She may live, as you say she is so beautiful and so happy." Ella spoke as if she were saying a hardly learnt lesson, and he looked at her wonderingly for a moment with hot, tear-swollen eyes.

" When they told me, I felt I should have choked if I hadn't rushed out and spoken about it to someone ; the nurses and servants and doctors drive me mad with their sighing and groaning, and attempts at comforting me," he went on impatiently.

" It's useless trying to comfort you," the girl whispered.

" Of course it is. I think of her as she was a few weeks ago, such a queen among women, and so awfully happy and pleased at making *me* happy too. And now she knows nothing about me, doesn't even know that I'm nearly mad with grief about her. It's an awful end to her life—and mine."

Again she muttered something to the effect of " his life not being over yet," and again he glanced away from his own misery, and looked with his pathetically sorrowful eyes into her set little face.

" You don't quite understand, after all," he said complainingly. " You don't know what it is to be on the point of losing someone who has been so happy through you, as Laura has been through me. I ought to go home, but how can I bear to face what I may have to hear ? I'd give all I possess to have her spared to me."

" *If* you did, and she were spared, she wouldn't be half

so happy, for you would both be poor," Ella said quietly. And then Sir Walter, finding that he was not deriving all the comfort from her companionship that he had anticipated, went back to the home over which the shadow of death was deepening fast.

On the evening of that same day, while the two girls were sitting at dinner, Ella lifted her hand to her head with a little sigh of weariness or pain.

"What is it?" May Meredith asked anxiously. "What is it, dear?"

"My head feels suddenly as heavy as lead, as heavy as my heart has been feeling all day," Ella said fretfully. "You'll excuse me, I know. The sights and odors of dinner are too much for me. May I go to the drawing room and lie down and wait for you?"

"Of course you may, but I believe you're suffering from inanition; you ate no luncheon, I noticed. At any rate, have some wine and a biscuit now."

At the name of even wine and a biscuit, the nauseating feeling which had been creeping over Ella all day intensified itself, and her hot hands and head seemed to grow hotter each moment. With some difficulty and effort she made her way to the drawing room, and here, under the influence of the light, cool, fragrant atmosphere—an atmosphere in which the odors of beeswax and turpentine from the polished floor, peat from the moors, and lemon-scented verbenas from the gardens mingled in one invigorating element of sweetness, which seemed to permeate her whole being for a minute or two.

"It was only the excitement of hearing about Lady St. Austle, and the smell of the dinner, after all, which made me feel so faint and sick," the girl told herself reassuringly, as she sank down among a heap of cool cushions on the sofa, leant her head back, and presently sank into a sleep,

during which she chattered spasmodically every now and again, and fell over countless precipices.

May, coming in presently, found the room heavy with the indescribable heaviness, in which there is no definite odor, which a feverish body is sure to infuse into the air. All the freshness had been absorbed into the hot little body which was slumbering restlessly on the sofa, and, with a qualm of remorse for having allowed Ella to run the risks of infection which she had run, May realized that a strong fever had possession of her poor little friend.

"She must be isolated at once, and I will send a hospital nurse to take charge of the case," the doctor told Miss Meredith, when he came in response to her earnest summons. "You must not expose yourself to unnecessary danger, my dear Miss Meredith; you must keep away from her."

"Keep away from her?"

"Yes! indeed you must. Don't you understand it is an infectious case? You must preserve your own health by taking every precaution in your power."

"Is it scarlet fever?"

The doctor's head bent slowly in assent.

"Poor child!" May said warmly; "poor motherless child! I shall not leave her to the care of servants and a hospital nurse. I'll take my share of the work of nursing her, and of the danger that attends the work."

"Has she no relations—no nearer friends than yourself?"

"She has a stepmother who is married again, a sweet woman whose sweetness turned Ella's nature into gall, because they misunderstood one another. *Her* presence would give Ella neither comfort nor pleasure."

The doctor had several other critical cases awaiting him, consequently he had no more time to waste in expostulating with Miss Meredith about her rashness.

"Take care of yourself, the poor little lady is in excellent

hands and has a splendidly sound constitution. In all probability she will pull through."

"You don't speak with any air of assurance about it," May said anxiously.

"How can I, in these critical cases where physical fever is fed by mental fuel? Miss Poynter is a very excitable, very highly strung kind of a girl, who would 'die of a rose in aromatic pain.' Even the perfectly equable mind of Lady St. Austle did not stand her in good stead when the crux came. You know she has succumbed?"

"Do you mean that she is *dead?*" May asked in reverential horror.

"She passed away this evening, just about the time your poor little friend was attacked, I fancy," and then, with a parting shake of the hand, the doctor got himself away to the fulfillment of further painful duties in that fever-haunted locality.

Within ten minutes of his departure Miss Meredith was bending over Ella's bed, soothing the girl's scorching forehead with her cool hands, and murmuring a few refreshing words that had no special meaning for the sufferer, who was beginning to feel doubtfully mixed as to whether she, Ella Poynter, had anything to do with the parched, suffering body that was lying on the bed.

"Mother *would* tell me if it is me," she moaned at intervals; "that woman who married Guy would deceive me about it; she always deceived me. She said she would never marry, and now she has married and deceived Guy as well as me. I want my own mother, my own, own mother; she would never deceive me."

She would go on rambling in this strain for hours at a stretch until May's heart told her there was meaning in the poor girl's madness, truth in the tale which Ella had indignantly repudiated when it was told to her at Norwood. Then day by day Ella's mania and fever strengthened and

deepened until, at last, fearing that she was taking upon herself the hideous responsibility of keeping a mother away from her dying child, she (May) strangled her own aversion to again addressing, or coming in contact with, her false lover's wife, and sent the following lines to Mrs. Greg :

"Ella Poynter is dangerously ill with scarlet fever at my house. She is always calling for her 'mother' in her delirium. Will you come to her? All that I can do for her good and your comfort shall be done. Send me a wire saying by what train the carriage shall meet you at the Trelyn station.

"MAY MEREDITH."

There had been an armed neutrality between Ted Greg and his wife for several weeks. He had never ventured to attempt an explanation, being, as all men are, abjectly afraid of "a fuss," and she had never condescended to ask for one since the departure of her lodger. Mrs. Greg had much more time for retrospective peerings into the feverish past, and continuous broodings over the painful present, than had ever been vouchsafed to her in busier days. Ted was having a long spell of domestic life, and the peaceful tenor of its uninterrupted way had a depressing effect upon him. There were so few topics that he dared to broach to his wife, now that she had found him out in the heartless escapade in which he had indulged during his visit to Trelyn Towers. The fact of the reticence she had observed on the matter, since her first outburst of injured furious feeling, only made him suspect that she knew a great deal more than she had yet revealed to him, and he had no fancy for unlocking the flood-gates of her wrath by any injudicious allusions to his past pursuits. In his present pursuits she no longer seemed to take any very vital interest. She would rouse herself, with a very palpable effort, when he came into

the house after an absence from it of a few hours, to ask him some obviously artificial question about his health, or the state of the weather in town, or what the evening papers said on some subject of current importance. But she never questioned him as to where he had been, or whom he had seen, and he felt resentful at her negative attitude and want of curiosity, although relieved by it.

Decidedly the glamour was gone from that passionate love which had blinded them to inevitable consequences so many years ago. As they sat opposite to each other at table, or reading by lamplight at convenient angles of the comfortably seated cozy corner, he constantly found himself looking at her and wondering why he was unable any longer to stir up the ashes of the old romance. She was a finely made woman, one of the few who do not become either obese or skinny in their second summer. He had wildly admired those Venuslike proportions once, and was ready to admit that they were still as perfect as ever. But the contemplation of them no longer thrilled him.

She had always had a pretty way of saying trivial things, but his taste for her piquant similes and quaint little axioms was faded. It rather bored him than otherwise when she did rouse herself to talk to and try to amuse him. He had grown "to prefer the conversation of one who could speak with knowledge and ease of horses and dogs—one who could not only speak of them with understanding, but who possessed them, and had been ready and willing to share these possessions with him. Oh, the folly, the blind, infatuated folly which had made him fetter himself as he had done in his impetuous youth!" He would think such thoughts as these frequently as he sat silently smoking by her silent side. And she read his thoughts, and marveled at her own patience in still enduring the life into which he had led her, and of which he was clearly so very, very tired.

She felt contemptuous of herself sometimes when any-

thing like a throb of love for him stirred her pulses. It was too undignified to go on caring for a man who was only restrained by the law from leaving her for another woman. Nevertheless her pulses were so stirred at times when he gave her some of the old looks and words, or when he complained of one of the trivial aches and pains which the manliest of men are apt to find so unbearable. She would at these latter times wait on him with much of the old assiduity which had been so deliciously soothing to him at one time, but which now rather bored him, as it was an effort to respond to it with becoming gratitude and warmth. She was naturally quick to discern the effort, and equally quick to feel hurt and thrown back upon herself by it, and so the gulf between them was widening daily, and she was rapidly realizing that there was no one in this beautiful world of ours to whom her heart could turn.

Years ago, when first the friendship which had ended so fatally had begun between them, the fact of her being older than Ted Greg had not struck her as being a painful disadvantage. She would like to have been younger certainly, but her additional years had not weighed heavily upon her. But now they galled her frightfully. He still looked far away from one's usual conception of middle age in a man; while she, ah! how keenly she felt the fact that she had lost the lightness, both of physique and heart, which only belongs to those over whose heads fewer years than forty have sped.

If her life had been a happier one, she probably would not have regretted that this should be the case. At any rate, even had she regretted it, she would not have smarted, and been humbled and mortified, and made at times sullenly angry by it. But as it was, she had so much time to brood over the lack in herself of the qualities and qualifications which Ted held in highest esteem in woman. He would admire openly slim, graceful women whose delicate

proportions made her finely formed but rather massive figure seem big and outsized. He would rave about the beauty of tiny, dainty little hands and feet, and candidly admit that he would give a good deal, when he had a headache, to feel cool, slim fingers, light as a butterfly's wing, fluttering over his forehead. On one of these occasions she had yearningly and pathetically, but, oh, *so foolishly*, laid her hand with all the tenderness she felt upon his brow, and he had jerked his head away, telling her that her hands "were nice useful ones, but that was not the sort of thing he meant."

Another point on which he scraped her sensibilities was that of dress. For years she had adopted a more matronly style of dress than pleased his taste. If she had been matronly in black velvet and diamonds, he would not have minded it so much. But as he did not give her the money wherewith to procure the black velvet and diamonds, she had to be contented with black serge or some other lusterless material, and a brooch which rather accentuated than relieved the somberness of her attire.

"You get yourself up like a grandmother," he said to her once, and she let herself reply :

"I probably should have been one if I had done my duty to my daughter, instead of leaving her with a slur upon her name."

"It's rather late in the day to taunt me with what was, after all, quite as much your fault as mine. You were older than I was and ought to have been wiser," he retorted, and then, with a passionate burst of tears, she implored his forgiveness and confessed that she had been the faultier and more foolish of the two.

It was a miserable state of things, and it was poor comfort to her to know that hers was the common case. By their mutual disgrace he had lost much that he valued in life, and gained nothing but her, and for many a long day

he had counted this gain as his greatest loss. He had loved her so exhaustively, when he had no right to do so, that when it became his duty he had no stock of love left. The zest had been in the present, in the hairbreadth escapes, in the excitement and opposition. As soon as there was no more risk, no more concealments to be practiced, no more finesse required, she fell flat upon the nerves that once had been in a high state of tension constantly about her. This had been the case especially since he had known May Meredith and allowed himself to be entangled by her evident liking for him. Indifference was fast becoming aversion toward his wife, and she, poor woman, saw that it was so, and in bitterness of spirit and contrition knew that she was only receiving her just reward for having outraged the laws of God and man.

He happened to be standing at the door when Miss Meredith's telegram arrived, and without a moment's hesitation he opened it, though it was addressed to his wife. Its contents startled him painfully and puzzled him much. "How had May got hold of the fact of Ella being his wife's child? How had she learnt the odious truth that there was a genuine wife, a real Mrs. Greg, at all?" He asked himself these questions angrily, as he sprang into the room where Marian was seated at her sewing-machine, and the angry glow on his face and the fire in his eyes prepared her for something unpleasant.

"What the devil does this mean, Marian?" he began, impatiently throwing the telegram down before her. All kindness, all consideration, all sympathy for her, were banished by his furious disgust at May having discovered that he was a married man. He waited, trembling with wrath, while the unhappy mother read and grasped the meaning of the telegram, and when she rose up sobbing, "I must go to my child, to my darling, at once," he asked again impatiently;

"What the devil does it mean? You haven't been base enough to write and insult Miss Meredith by telling her that I'm married to you, have you?"

"What does it matter now, when my child may be dying?" she sobbed, trying to pass him. Then, as he laid a detaining hand on her arm, she went on:

"No, no, I never wrote to her or tried to see her. She came here and found it out for herself, and my child was with her. I knew my darling, and told her in my agitation that I was her mother, and she was frightened and wouldn't believe me. But now she calls for me and I must go."

"It will be a ghastly insult to Miss Meredith," he muttered; and she dried her eyes and spoke proudly:

"Miss Meredith is a woman; she will forget that I am the wife of a man who has behaved basely to her, and remember only that I am Ella's mother."

CHAPTER XXV.

A HARD TASK.

HAPPILY for the preservation of her composure May Meredith was thinking of Ella and Ella only, when Mrs. Greg reached Belhaven. It had been the intention of the young mistress of the house to keep out of the way of the woman whom she had unintentionally wronged, the wife whom she had in all innocence supplanted in Ted Greg's affections. But when the crucial moment came, May had forgotten everything saving that it was a mother who had come to her probably dying child, and so, as Mrs. Greg stepped, half dazzled, and giddy with suspense and fatigue, into the lighted hall, it was May's arm that supported her and May's voice that said:

"Thank God, you are here! She will get better now, I feel—she does nothing but cry for her mother."

On her side Mrs. Greg had determined to hold aloof, as much as was compatible with common gratitude, from the forward young woman who had chased her (Mrs. Greg's) husband into the fastness of his own home. She would say nothing, she had resolved, that could recall Miss Meredith's mistake and humiliation to the latter, but she would abstain from anything that might be taken for cordiality or for condonation of the girl's grave offense.

But when May met her with those words of thankfulness and hope the mother's love obliterated the wife's resentment, and she drew May's unwilling young form close to her heart in a fond hug.

"Bless you, Miss Meredith; you have done a thing that must bring a blessing on your head in giving my child back to me, for now I will never let her go again. God will be good and give me her love, and I will never forfeit *that* for any other."

"Come at once," was all May could answer, for this implied willingness to surrender Ted was a thing that passed all understanding. She had nearly succeeded in blotting him out of her own heart, she believed, because to retain him would be criminal. But that the woman with the right to him should be capable of contemplating the renunciation of him was simply appalling.

Together they went up the stairs, passed the sheets steeped in disinfecting fluid, which were hung up between the little side corridor in which Ella's bed and dressing room were situated and the rest of the house. Everything was exquisitely orderly, clean, fresh, and quiet. If Ella had been the mistress of the house the servants could not have crept about more noiselessly.

"You are more than good to my child," Mrs. Greg whispered, as they paused for a moment at the door of the sick room, to which the white-capped, white-aproned hospital nurse advanced with a cheerful countenance to meet them

and command that, "Mrs. Greg should lay aside her out-door garments before entering the infected chamber." She tried to obey, but she had caught a glimpse of a tossing little form on the bed, and the grasp she gave at her cloak and bonnet-strings merely tightened their fastenings. It was May's hands that lightly lifted off the out-door attire, May's soft, firm touch that smoothed the hair that had grown to look rough and unkempt during the journey, and May's kind, strong arm that held the weeping woman up in her first paroxysm of distress at finding her child worn to a shadow, and burnt up with fever and delirium.

"If my death can secure your happiness, I will pray to die with my child," she moaned, and May, who did not dare to relax her self-control for an instant, replied almost coldly:

"Pray to live for Ella's sake, *and mine*, if you really feel kindly toward me. I have had a rough awakening from a bad dream; I don't want to go through the anguish of such a dream and awakening again. Let me forget *everything* that can stand between Ella's mother and myself."

"You are good and strong," Mrs. Greg said quietly, but to herself she added, "She has no trouble in ruling her love by her reason! O Ted, yet *after all*, you preferred her to me! Prudence has more charms for you than passion."

For a few days after Lady St. Austle's funeral the widower mourned in solitude. Then Guy and his wife came to try and comfort him, and out of the gratefulness of his heart Sir Walter tried to take an interest in life again. He had been so absorbed in his own grief—in the discomfiture and upsetting of all his plans, in his amazement at finding that the strongly built, healthy, beautiful wife, of whom he had been so proud, had laid down her arms and capitulated at the first touch of disease—that he had asked nothing, heard nothing, cared for nothing concerning his neighbors. While Laura had lived, while he could still

hang on to hope, it had been necessary to him to pour forth his feelings to someone, and he selected Ella as the resposi-tory of them. But now feeling seemed dead within him, and he gave no thought to the poor little repository of his anxieties.

Heavy rains and generally dispiriting weather had set in, and consequently the trio at Trelyn Towers were very much concentered in themselves through being immured in the house. The fever that still raged in the locality frightened the servants out of their ordinary straying and gossiping proclivities, and kept them in their grooves of duty. The same cause kept the doctor too fully occupied to admit of his having time to pay unprofessional visits; accordingly, after Laura's death, as there was no one ill at Trelyn Towers, he steered clear of Sir Walter. These various causes combined to keep Walter in ignorance of Ella's illness, and made him appear to May Meredith to be heartlessly apathetic about it.

One day she went out for a ride alone, and as she rode through the quiet roads around Belhaven, roads on which you rarely met anything more interesting than a wagoner and his team, a fish cart, or a butcher boy, her mind was dwelling on some of those inequalities between the sexes which have disturbed stronger feminine minds than hers.

Naturally the consideration of her own case occupied much of her time. After all, what had she done that she should feel such shame and remorse as she had been feeling for many a long month on account of Mr. Greg? He had sought her and shown more than a warm liking for her, as openly as if he had not been committing a rank offense against two women, his wife and herself, by so showing it. He had acted a lying part so cleverly that she had never once suspected him to be a rascal for playing it. He had fed her love with such looks and words, such actions and promises, as had made it a strong, lusty thing! He had

made her feel that the beautiful home she had always loved so dearly was but a barren place without him, and that the pursuits in which she had once reveled with healthy, hearty zest were dull and tame when they were not shared by him. He had so acted that she had a feeling of shame about herself, an humbling desire to keep the intercourse she had held secret from all her old friends and neighbors, for fear they should despise her, and speak of her contemptuously among themselves as a girl who had been lightly won, and only saved from shame by an accident, and through no prudence of her own. And all the while she was undergoing this punishment for the offense of his duplicity, he was going on unabashed, as if nothing had happened, living the same life he had lived before he knew her, exacting the same dutiful attention and regard from his wife, as if he had never set a rival above her in his heart, and being welcomed just as heartily by people who were pleased to have him at their houses as if he had never wrecked a good girl's happiness!

In thinking these thoughts it must be admitted that May took a great deal too much for granted. In reality, Mr. Greg was not so callous about her sufferings as she chose to imagine him. Nor were the relations between his wife and himself so cheerfully amicable as May jealously conjectured them to be. Nor was his conscience so heartlessly at rest as she presumed it was. He had been a great sinner, but he was not entirely unpunished, though he did belong to the nobler sex.

From herself her thoughts reverted to Ella Poynter. How fearlessly and kindly the girl had gone out and proffered her sympathy, and faced the danger which had eventually overtaken her, in the cause of Sir Walter St. Austle when the latter craved for sympathy. Now Ella was ill and incapable of giving either sympathy or comfort to anyone, and what did the man do who had brought the calamity upon her?

Stayed away! and did not even trouble his head to inquire how she fared!

She had ridden close up to the lodge gates of Trelyn Towers by the time her thoughts reached this point, and a sudden revulsion of feeling assailed her as she saw Sir Walter come out accompanied by his brother. The widower looked grave, but not inconsolably sad, in fact his face was rather animated at the moment, for he had just been discussing with Guy the advisability of building a new pheasantry, and of putting some hundreds of young trout into the lake. His eyes glistened when he caught sight of May, and she saw that his gaze wandered behind her as if in search of someone else.

"You're coming in to call on Guy's wife, May, aren't you?" he said eagerly.

May shook her head. She was very sorry that Walter had lost his wife, but at the same time she felt a human and womanly desire to punish him for his indifference about Ella.

"I don't think it would be quite safe!" she said, drawing her horse a few paces away from the two men, and as Sir Walter's face fell, Guy answered for him:

"You needn't be alarmed, May, everything that sanitation can do has been done; there is absolutely no fear of infection."

"I'm not afraid for myself," the girl said quietly; "Walter knows that neither I nor Ella Poynter were ever afraid for ourselves."

"For whom are you afraid, then?" Guy asked.

"For you and your wife—and Walter."

"Don't be absurd, come in," Walter said impatiently; he had utterly failed not only to grasp, but even to suspect her meaning.

"No—I won't have it on my conscience, though the doctor says the infectious stage is not reached yet, at least the

most infectious stage is not yet reached, I should say, for there are no signs of recovery shown yet."

"No signs of recovery shown by whom?" A look of understanding and alarm flashed into Walter's blue eyes as he spoke.

"By Ella—poor child!"

"*Ella!* Ella ill?"

"So ill that she may—she may *die*," May gulped out, the tears of sorrow and anger starting from her eyes, "and you have never taken the trouble to inquire for her."

"You haven't thought—you couldn't have thought—*she* doesn't think that I knew? Ella ill! dear little sweet friend that she has been to me——"

"She doesn't know, she can't think anything," May said forgivingly. His evident distress softened her heart and judgment toward this special male defaulter at once.

"I shall go back with you," he insisted. "Come in and speak to Guy's wife while my horse is being saddled."

"Mrs. Guy must talk to me from the window if I go up to the house," May declared; "and Walter, it's no use your going back with me. You can't see her; no one is let see her now but the nurses and her mother."

"Her *mother!*" Guy exclaimed.

"Yes, her mother," May said boldly, but blushing a little; "*you* know, of course, who her mother was—and is? I sent for her when Ella began to be dangerously ill. *How* her mother's love has struggled to save Ella! Don't look stern and superior, Guy. Mrs. Greg may have been a faulty wife, I, for one, don't know how far Mr. Poynter tried her, but she's a real true woman, and such a loving mother that God will be more lenient to her offenses than man has been, I'm sure."

"Because she shows common humanity, and comes to nurse her daughter at this late hour of the day of her life?"

"Not only because of that, but because of so many other things," May retorted warmly. "It wasn't pleasant to Ella's mother to come to *my* house, for reasons you can guess, even if you don't know them."

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, May," Guy said apologetically, "but I am an old-fashioned fellow in many respects, I know, and I think the women who have gone off the straight road, as Mrs. Greg has gone, should hold aloof from good girls like yourself, if the good girl's haven't the hardness to pass by on the other side, on their own account."

"Why, you're harder than a woman, Guy."

"I have a stake in the domestic morality of the country; I am a married man, remember," he answered, with a weird attempt at a smile.

"And so you think you protect your own wife by being pitiless to other women, who have been *found out*," May said cynically. She was ready to go any lengths in her defense of Mrs. Greg, the woman of whom she was so deadly jealous that she felt her jealousy to be worse than any crime Mrs. Greg had been guilty of for love.

"May Meredith is a quixotically wrong-headed little fool," Guy said to his brother, when speaking of this passage at arms, later on. "She's trying to salve her conscience about her infatuation for that blackguard Greg by taking up the cudgels in defense of his wife. I don't want my wife to be brought in contact with that woman; the shadow of her sin stood between Mabel and me for many a year."

"That was because you taught Mabel to think you a greater prig than you could ever possibly be."

"No one knows what a prig he may become till the taint comes near his own womenkind. Besides, I hate to feel that *my* wife bore Poynter's irksome yoke patiently for years, and the other woman had the pluck to throw it off because she

found it unendurable. In fact, Walter, I've done what I vowed from a boy I never would do: I've married a woman with a past; not only with a past of her own, but with another woman's past hanging on to her, and it's confoundedly unpleasant."

"I suppose you went into it with your eyes open; and, after all, you haven't been a saint yourself, Guy, any more than I have."

"My eyes were open enough, but we all see things in a different light after we're married, to what we saw them in before," Guy grumbled, and in uttering this truism he dug down to the root of the evil. Clear-sightedness concerning the beloved object is denied to each one of us until holy matrimony makes us clairvoyant, until custom, monotony, and a certain sense of security make us careless about curbing our own faults and intolerant to the faults we blinked and winked at before the legal knot was tied. "Marriage is the grave of romance," is a truism that is constantly spoken. It may be added that, in the majority of cases, it is also the grave of forbearance, of unselfishness, and of that flattering desire to please, which, as much as anything, inflamed the heart to love.

There was certainly no very overwhelming desire to please his wife in Guy St. Austle's mind just now. He thought he was studying her highest welfare in thwarting her wish to go and show kindness and sympathy to the anxious, harassed mother of the sick girl. Association, on terms of equality and familiarity, with women who have set the world's opinion at defiance by kicking over the matrimonial traces must, he argued, have a deteriorating, if not an actually demoralizing effect on other tender-hearted women. If Mabel had been cast in a sternly severe mold, and had farther been addicted to snubbing her erring fellow-creatures, he would not have interposed to preserve Mrs. Greg from a justly deserved jeremiad. But as it was, he knew too

well what a sensitively warm, sympathetic nature Mabel was endowed with, how harshly she was always ready to judge herself, how leniently she looked upon the slips and stumbles of others. It was his duty, he told himself, to keep her from compromising herself by showing co-reliability and Christian feeling to a woman who had let her loving heart mislead her to her endless discomfort, disgrace, and remorse. Accordingly he told her decisively that she was not to dream of going to inquire for Ella Poynter; and when she reminded him that she had treated Ella as her own daughter for years, and therefore could not justify herself to either her God or her conscience for being neglectful of the girl, he replied:

"You must let me be your conscience, dear, in this matter. I wouldn't oppose your seeing Ella for a moment, you know that, if it were not for her mother being there, apparently an honored guest in May's house. I don't approve of the canonization of vice just because it happened to display a little natural feeling at a late hour of the day. Probably Mrs. Greg has grown tired of the man for whom she left her child; so she thinks she may as well turn on the tap of maternal feeling in her old age."

"There has never been anything artificial about her; she has been eminently, disinterestedly, ruinously *real*," Mrs. St. Austle pleaded, but Guy only smiled in scornful dissent, and was not moved by the appeal from his resolve for a moment.

"How honorable he is, and how hard!" his wife thought, the first time he opposed her more generous impulses. Afterward she got into the habit of thinking, "How hard he is!" only, and of entirely forgetting that he was not one jot or tittle more honorable in his hardness than when he first told her he wanted her for his wife; and she dreaded acceding to his wishes because of the rigor of his views. She had esteemed and honored him for holding those views then, when they could not exercise any power of control over her. But now that she was compelled either to defer

to them, or to oppose and so seriously annoy him, she found the friction very hard to endure, and told herself she would have been happier in a less perfect air.

"You find the task of pleasing me an arduous one, I'm afraid."

He bent over her and kissed her on the forehead as he spoke, but the caress did not blind her to the fact that he meant to have his way, whether she found it a hard one to travel or not.

"A younger woman with a less fully developed will than mine might possibly fulfill the 'task' more gracefully."

"You admit that it is a 'task'?"

"I am sorry you used the word, Guy."

CHAPTER XXVI.

VERY HUMAN.

WHAT a critical moment that was when Ella first opened her hollow eyes, with the light of restored reason in them, and looked at those around her with understanding.

She had, after weary weeks of incessant, feverish, spasmodic motion, sunk into a quiet sleep—a sleep so quiet, indeed, that her mother bent over her in a frenzy of fear at brief intervals, thinking that the "soul, the body's guest," had indeed departed. But at last, at that blissful hour when nature seems to be at its strongest, at sunrise, Ella opened her eyes, drew a deep breath of satisfaction, and asked:

"Where have I been, mother?"

May Meredith, standing in a state of strained expectancy at the foot of the bed, fell back out of sight at once, choking with emotion, and "sniffing like a cadging old washerwoman," Ella told her afterward. It seemed to May too

touching, beautiful, and extraordinary to be true, that Ella should at once on coming back from the Valley of the Shadow of Death recognize and confess her mother! But to Mrs. Greg it seemed quite natural and in the order of things. She had so impregnated the mental atmosphere around her with love for her daughter that she *knew* that the great God who is love himself would turn that daughter's heart toward her with the first ray of returning reason. So there was no agitation or excitement in the tone in which she answered:

"You have been here at Belhaven all the time, my darling, and I have been with you."

"Kiss me!" Ella commanded briefly, and when her command had been obeyed rapturously, she whispered:

"I haven't been here all the time; I've been through such lovely lands of flowers, and you were there, too, mother. We were so wonderfully happy—you, I, and Walter."

"Sweet dreams, dear, mercifully sent to you to ease your pain. You must be quiet, now, when you have spoken one little word of gratitude to Miss Meredith."

"Thanks, dear May," Ella murmured; then she looked past May, and asked:

"May he come and see me?"

"He! Who?" Mrs. Greg asked, looking at May.

"I think she means Sir Walter St. Austle," May explained confusedly; "she caught the fever from him—I mean, he gave it to her coming straight from his wife, who—who had it so badly, you know," she went on in agony, fearing the effect of any untowardly sudden disclosure upon Ella.

"Oh, Sir Walter St. Austle! the brother of the man who married Mrs. Poynter?" Mrs. Greg said, putting on a little bit of armor at once. The brother of the man who had married Mrs. Poynter could never be a satisfactory friend for the daughter of Mrs. Poynter's unfortunate and disgraced predecessor.

"He was here yesterday, inquiring for you," May resumed hurriedly; "he will come again to-day, and will be so glad when I tell him about you——"

"She must have some milk and brandy now, and not listen to any more society talk," Mrs. Greg said gently but firmly, and jealously pressing May out of her position by Ella's side. It was intolerable to the mother that, now in the very first moment of regaining her child, the shadow of a man should be cast between them. She looked so reproachfully at Miss Meredith that the latter smarted afresh under the mortifying conviction that Mrs. Greg would never realize how absolutely innocent she (May) had been in the affair with Mrs. Greg's careless husband.

"She has held her hand against me on account of Ella," May thought, as she went quickly from the room; "but she will never forgive me, never! Any more than I would ever forgive any wretch of a woman who took his love from me," she added with sudden passion.

It became apparent to his brother and sister-in-law, soon after this, that the sharpest part of the pain Sir Walter felt for the death of his wife and the enforced deprivation of her flattering companionship, was being soothed away or dulled rather, by his anxiety to be assured that Ella was out of danger, and to see her again. He was hardly conscious himself of the depth of the distress he had felt when first he heard of the dangerous character of the girl's illness. And he was entirely unconscious of the way he "gave himself away" on the subject, at every turn, to his keenly perceptive relatives. It was a perfectly futile proceeding on his part to attempt to throw a particle of dust in their eyes, after the revelation he had made in expression and manner, during that interview with May Meredith which has been recorded. His visits to his wife's grave, which had been duly and daily made for a few weeks, grew intermittent. The wreaths and crosses of white hothouse flowers, which

had been the work of his own hands for a while, were now more frequently made by Mrs. Guy St. Austle than by the widower. When he thought of Laura he loved and admired and lamented her as warmly as ever, but as a matter of fact, he did not think of her as frequently as he felt he ought to. The living Ella perpetually intervened between the dead Laura and himself, and his efforts to keep up a mourning mien failed very soon to deceive even himself.

When at last Ella's convalescence was a pronounced and indisputable fact, when sanitation had done its all to purify and destroy all the germs of infection at Belhaven, when the barrier of prudence erected by Mrs. Greg had no longer an excuse for existing, he waited for no invitation, but went at once to see the little friend whom he had nearly destroyed in his careless craving for sympathy.

A vague expectation of finding Ella alone thrilled him all the time as he rode over. The day was so deliciously mild and sunny that it was only reasonable to suppose a woman of sense would take advantage of it and recoup nerves which had been exhausted by nursing, with exercise and open air. May would certainly be out riding, and so he would have an opportunity of telling Ella some of the grateful, tender thoughts of her which were filling his heart.

He had no thought of making love or proposing to her. He was striving hard to think of himself as a lonely and bereft man for the remainder of his days. But all the same he longed to see Ella, untrammeled by the presence of other people, and loyally as he strove to keep his bereft condition uppermost in his mind, he looked more cheerful than resigned, when his eyes lighted on the brightly expectant, pleasure flushed face of his little friend.

It was disappointing to him for a moment to find Mrs. Greg installed at her daughter's side, placidly knitting a stocking for the finely formed leg of her absent Ted. It may be told in passing that it was one of that fastidious

gentleman's numerous fads to tolerate only those stockings which were knitted by his wife. She had been wont to regard this as a proof of affection, and kept her mind closed against the entrance of the conviction which occasionally assailed it, that it was because she chose a more artistic blend of colors than could be purchased in the ready-made article in the shops.

May, too, had perversely chosen to remain at home this morning instead of going for her usual ride. But May, he knew, would have considerately relieved him of her presence if it had not been for Mrs. Greg.

He felt an instinctive dislike to the mother of the girl he loved, as soon as he saw her. "It was this woman," he bethought himself angrily, "who had, by her selfish indulgence of her criminal passion, brought a slur upon his darling little friend's name." He had only just learnt the story. Guy had confided it to him with many stinging animadversions on the culpable woman's conduct, and many biting regrets that such conduct would inevitably ruin poor Ella's matrimonial prospects. "With the history of her mother behind her, no fellow who respects himself will marry the girl," Guy had said pungently from the top of the tower of his own moral strength. And though Walter had not assented to this dictum he had not liked it, and it had rankled in his mind.

He remembered it vividly when Mrs. Greg bowed her stately head stiffly in acknowledgment of the introduction that was hurriedly effected between them. What business had such a woman to come into her daughter's life just now, and try to mar it more than she had done already? It was clearly Mrs. Greg's duty to have effaced herself and left poor Ella in ignorance of the fatal damaging link between them. There was a sparkle in his eye and a flush on his forehead that betokened annoyance, and it was with almost a coldly haughty manner that he turned, after a silent bow

to the mother, to make eager inquiries of the daughter about her past sufferings and present welfare.

"I have always felt that it was my fault, my selfish indulgence in the comfort of coming and talking to you, that made you ill," he said in a low tone, bending nearer to her than Mrs. Greg liked. "And when you were ill they wouldn't let me see you. I ought to have been privileged to help to nurse you through an illness you owe to me."

"You could hardly play the part of sick-nurse to a young lady," Mrs. Greg put in chillingly.

"It would have been too funny to see you in a white cap and apron," Ella said nervously. The suppressed antagonism between her mother and the man who was more than interesting, more than other men to her, made her feel shaky in her weak state.

"You have had the flowers? I picked them myself every day since I knew you were ill! You have had them, haven't you?"

Ella looked first at her mother, and then at May, with an angry, questioning look that showed she thought herself unjustly treated.

"I have never had them! Why have I never had them?" she said impetuously.

"The flowers that came from Trelyn Towers were all highly scented hothouse flowers, utterly unfit for a sick-room——" Mrs. Greg was explaining, when Ella interrupted pettishly:

"But I might have been told they were sent, at least."

"You shall have them twice a day in future, to make up for having been deprived of them in the past," he said doggedly. He had come disposed to be "very stand off the grass," as he termed it, with Mrs. Greg, under the mistaken impression that she would be terribly anxious to throw her daughter at his head. Now that he had found her the reverse of this, he felt perversely annoyed with her for hav-

ing the audacity to be indifferent to him. She was more than indifferent; in fact, she was positively cool! She, a woman with a past that ought to have made her humble to everyone, and a slave to her daughter's lightest whim.

"You will not be taxed to send them for long. My daughter and I hope to get away for change of air as soon as she can travel, and that I trust will be in a very few days."

"Surely you don't mean to go from here? May, you can't part with her, can you?" he said, ignoring Mrs. Greg and appealing defiantly to the girl.

"I shall miss Ella dreadfully, but I can't interfere with Mrs. Greg's plans. You will let her come back to me by and by though, won't you?"

There was almost a deferential air, Sir Walter thought disgustedly, in May's tone toward Mrs. Greg. He had always regarded May as being such a highly moral girl that he was staggered to find that she was treating a woman who had erred, and whose error might interfere with the easy fulfillment of his own desires, with such perfect respect. He flattered himself that he was "not a narrow-minded fellow," he had always been most liberally lenient to other people's stumbles and slips. "But, hang it all, when a thing of the sort touches a woman one's fond of, and injures her in the estimation of the world, it's about time to make a stand against it," he thought.

He was not clear in his mind yet how he should make this stand. He had arrived at the knowledge, since he had been in the room, that it would make him very unhappy unless he could keep Ella near him, and have her very much to himself. How he was going to do this he could not determine, till—well, till he had thought the matter over seriously, and perhaps discussed it with Guy. But in the interim he was very sure that it would be a good thing to get Ella *away from her* mother's influence.

"I shall come and take you out for your first drive. You'll let me do that, won't you?" he asked, bending down over the arm of Ella's chair, and speaking almost in a whisper.

"Yes," Ella said joyfully, aloud. "What will you drive me in?"

"I've just got a new thing—a Norwegian cariole, such a queer little affair; there's only a seat for one besides the driver. It looks a cross between a coffin and a perambulator."

"Doesn't sound cheerful; I don't think I'll go in it," Ella laughed, while Mrs. Greg put in with grave decision:

"You certainly will not go in it, dear. If there is only room for one besides the driver, that one must not be my daughter."

"Oh, why! mother? You've no nonsensical notions about its not being proper, have you?"

"The notion may be nonsensical, but I have it."

"In this part of the country, we think more of the spirit than of the letter of the rules of conventionality and propriety," Sir Walter said dryly.

"I am more anxious, naturally, than most mothers would be, that my daughter should not outrage either," Mrs. Greg replied, looking him so bravely in the face that he felt ashamed of the side thrust he had given her, while at the same time May, who was growing tired of the razors that were flying in the air, started up saying:

"I'm sure the luncheon bell ought to have rung before now! Mrs. Greg, do give me leave to have Ella wheeled into the dining room. You must stay, Walter, and lunch with us, in honor of our convalescent's first appearance at the family board again."

"Thanks. Then I may wheel you in?" he said heartily, and to Mrs. Greg's chagrin this programme was carried out.

"I have just won my child's heart, and this man will take it from me," she thought, and her own heart grew heavy with the reflection that, when this calamity came to pass, she would find but feeble compensation in the slack devotion of the man who had been the idol of her life.

"I have brought it upon myself. The burden that is laid upon my unworthy heart, the humbling of my head to the dust, is my punishment for that heart's wantonness and that head's weakness," she told herself bitterly, as she made her way slowly upstairs to make some trifling change in her toilet for luncheon. "His presence already has made her brighter than I have ever seen her before. He will take her—if his pride will let him—and when she goes to him she will go from me forever. O Ted! you have cost me very dear, and still I love you better than you'll ever love me again."

"Guy and his wife will wonder what has become of me," Sir Walter said, as they sat down to luncheon.

"Guy and his wife! are they here?" Ella asked, coloring faintly. "I don't care to see her, but I should like to see your brother. Ask him to come with you to-morrow if he's not afraid of infection, will you?"

"She takes it for granted he's coming to-morrow," Mrs. Greg thought jealously, and simultaneously Walter was thinking also jealously:

"What the devil does she want to see Guy for? I remember poor Laura used to fancy that Ella was rather fond of Guy, but I don't believe it myself."

However, in spite of his non-belief, he felt considerably annoyed at her wish to see Guy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"THE MOTHER CAME ACROSS."

WALTER ST. AUSTLE fluctuated considerably in feeling during that luncheon, and vacillated between one set of determinations and another, as feebly as the feeblest member of the weaker sex could have done. At one moment Ella's sparkling, piquant little face, turning itself toward him with evident liking and confidence, made him forget everything but his desire to secure the right to have that face to look at whenever he pleased. The next moment, perhaps, some chance word or allusion would make him keenly alive to all the little obstacles and unpleasantnesses that intervened between himself and the accomplishment of that desire. He knew how severely Guy would think, and speak, too, worse luck! of a connection that he would regard as such a pernicious one as the alliance of the head of the house of St. Austle with the daughter of a divorced woman. Sometimes he thought that he could cut the knot in two sharply by commanding Ella, and everyone else with whom he had anything to do, to cease from any kind of intercourse with Mrs. Greg, and let her be as one dead. At other times he felt that he might have to give in to Ella if she insisted on less drastic measures being pursued with regard to her mother. Then again, if he made this concession to her, Guy would inwardly certainly, and outwardly probably, despise and condemn him for his weakness. He wouldn't like Ella to think him cruel. He wouldn't like Guy to think him a fool. He ended by reminding himself that as he could not possibly, with any regard to decency, marry again for many months to come, he would not say anything definite to Ella yet. He upset himself immediately after this consoling reflection by remembering that he would be obliged

to be rather explicit if he insisted on Ella's remaining at Belhaven instead of going away with her mother. And that Ella should remain at Belhaven would be, he was sure, the best thing for her and the pleasantest thing for himself.

He felt himself to be deeply injured by these complications which Mrs. Greg's former conduct had introduced into his life. If it had not been for this faulty and superfluous person, there would be nothing to prevent his engaging himself quietly to Ella at once, having a very happy time, and in due season, when his year of mourning was over, marrying her. He felt more and more intolerant toward Mrs. Greg as he thought this. But the odd part of it was that he did not feel at all intolerant towards Ted Greg, indeed, he hardly gave a thought to that gentleman's share in the matter at all. It had all been the woman's fault, he felt sure, and he grew to hate her cordially, as he sat there writhing whenever Ella addressed her mother affectionately.

It was no better when he went home. His sister-in-law inquired tenderly and anxiously for Ella, but when she went on to express kindly sympathy for the poor mother who had suffered such tortures of doubt and fear and suspense while the girl had hung between life and death, Guy had abruptly and chillingly changed the subject. Now Sir Walter's own whole soul was in revolt against the existence of Mrs. Greg, but directly Guy snuffed her out in this contemptuously unceremonious way, Walter felt resentful of—he did not know what!

At Belhaven, after Sir Walter had gone, May Meredith had left Mrs. Greg and Ella alone. For an hour or two Mrs. Greg had read aloud, hoping to keep the subject of the late visitor at bay until May was with them again to help off any awkwardness that might arise when it was discussed. It was trying work for Mrs. Greg to read aloud this day, for she wanted to write to her husband. It was part of her punishment that she was constrained by something indefinable in

Ella's manner never to refer to him in any way. There were times when she longed to expatiate to Ella on what was best in the man to whom her heart and life had been given. But she dared not do it. The sanctity that doth hedge an innocent, good girl kept the guilty mother from doing it.

So now, after reading for a long time, she rose up slowly, saying :

"I must leave you now, dear ; I have a letter to write. What shall I get to amuse you while I am away ?"

"My own thoughts will amuse me well enough," Ella replied, bubbling over with deliciously pleasurable, hopeful excitement. "Mother, darling ! tell me, what do you think of Sir Walter St. Austle ?"

"I shall try not to think very much about him. His manner was distinctly discourteous to me."

"No, I'm sure it wasn't. It was awkward for him meeting you for the first time. Mrs. Guy most likely has been trying to set him against us all. Do like him, mother. I like him so much."

She wound her arms round her mother as she spoke, and Mrs. Greg would not for her life have unclasped those clinging arms, though she felt sure they would make her miss the post.

"You shall say what you think of him before I let you go. Isn't he *very* handsome ?"

Mrs. Greg thought of the far better-looking rock on which she had wrecked herself as she answered : "He is good-looking in a volatile way that is hardly becoming to either his age or his condition."

"He tried to be cheerful to-day to keep up my spirits."

"He was very successful, excepting when he addressed me or I addressed him. Now let me go, I won't be more than ten minutes writing my letter."

"Don't write it at all, don't send him a word, the brute !" *Ella cried*, with sudden fury. "He doesn't love you, mother ;

he's in love with May, the base brute, if he can love anyone but himself. He's——"

"Hush! he's my husband," Mrs. Greg groaned.

"That's no reason you should bear slights and neglect from him," said Ella.

"No, perhaps that is not the reason why I should bear them if they were offered me," Mrs. Greg said steadily.

"What other reason, then?" Ella asked quickly.

"Only that *I love him.* My fall was not due to passion, vanity, or caprice. *I loved!* I can only pray that the curse of loving so desperately and enduringly may be averted from my daughter."

In a moment a vision of Walter in his vast superiority to every other man danced before Ella's eyes.

"Poor mother!" she said softly, "what a pity it was you didn't know a man like Walter St. Austle first." Then, as her thoughts palpably meandered among the many admirable and affection inspiring and retaining qualities of Walter St. Austle, she allowed her mother to get away out of the room to write her letter without further let or hindrance.

It must not be supposed that May Meredith had thrown all recollection of her misplaced love and mistaken trust away like an old glove, because she had schooled herself to play a womanly and hospitable part to the wife of the man who had misled her. The memory of him, and of the happiness all that was winning and attractive about him had given her, was present far too often for her peace of mind. She took herself severely to task for allowing these memories to intrude themselves upon her. She endeavored to exorcise them by continually creating fresh, active interests for herself on her farm, among her laborers and their families, in her stables and kennels and garden. But if she kept them at bay during the day, there they were, lusty and strong as ever, in the dead, unhappy night.

It must not be supposed either that there was anything but the most gnawing pain for her in the continual sight and sound of Mrs. Greg. While Ella had been in danger Miss Meredith had thought of Mrs. Greg as Ella's mother only, and had been full of the heartiest pity and sympathy for her. But now that Ella was making a brilliantly happy recovery, it was "Ted's wife" whom May met and shrank from at every turn.

She hated herself for the meanness, but she could not conquer her jealous annoyance at Mrs. Greg being such a handsome woman still. What remained of her beauty indicated plainly how remarkable it must have been in those early days when Ted Greg had first known her. He, with his admiration for fine, well-grown women, must have adored the personal charms of this woman, whose beauty was still striking and statuesque. She never had the solace of remembering that even a Venus might pall upon a man who had fallen under the trick of fascination of a far less personally well-endowed woman. It made her sick to think how he must have often compared her—or rather contrasted her—with his handsome wife, to her (May's) disadvantage. It made her numb with pain nearly, when she would see one of Mr. Greg's rare letters to his wife awaiting the latter on the breakfast table. It kept up the irritation and fever in her mind, to know that this temporary separation between them was likely to rekindle the fire of Mr. Greg's love for his wife. May longed for Mrs. Greg's departure, and yet shrank from it, for it meant reunion with Ted.

The easy terms which May had been on with Ella's mother, while Ella's illness absorbed all other interests, gave place to strained relations now that Ella's illness was no longer the sole topic of conversation between them. There were so many subjects they were compelled to avoid, there were so few on which they could meet. Ella, engrossed in the dawning of a little romance of her own, was quite indif-

ferent to or unobservant of the awkwardness of the situation for May. After the manner of young people, she regarded her mother and her mother's husband as being retired from the service of love through age. It struck her as ridiculous, when she gave a passing thought to the matter, that her mother should have a sentiment for retaining Mr. Greg's heart, or that May should have a sentiment of jealous aversion for Mr. Greg's wife. Ella had rather an antipathy to the gentleman in question, and so was naturally intolerant to the folly of another girl in having liked him. What she had seen of the Greg domestic *ménage* disgusted her, it was so hopelessly middle-class. "The master of it had been all very well to look at, while swaggering away as a guest at Trelyn Towers, but after seeing that cottage at Norwood where he lived when he was at home, May must be a tame-spirited, unambitious little noodle ever to think of him again, much less to think of him kindly."

These were Ella's reflections when she had time to reflect about it at all, but she was a good deal engrossed in these days, for though Sir Walter had not spoken to her definitely, yet he devoted much of his time to her, and it was apparent to Ella that he did this in opposition to his brother's wishes, and in opposition also to his own aversion to her mother.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NOT WISE, BUT WOMANLY.

"WILL you go for a walk with me, Miss Meredith? I have something I must say to you before I go from your house, something which I must say without the dread of being interrupted by Ella."

The speaker was Mrs. Greg, and as she spoke May Meredith devoutly wished that she had never heard the name of

Greg or seen anyone who bore it. The "something which Mrs. Greg felt she must say" before she left May's house would probably be such a *résumé* of Miss Meredith's conduct with regard to Mrs. Greg's husband, as would humble the girl in her own estimation for the remainder of her life.

"Certainly I will come with you," she said, with a little tremor in her voice which she would have given half she possessed at the moment to have conquered, feeling that it would sound to Mrs. Greg like conscious guilt. "You are not well!" she added hastily, as she noticed an unusual look of excitement on the ordinarily composed, handsome face.

"I am not well; the air will do me good, perhaps."

Mrs. Greg walked hastily through the open window on to the terrace and turned toward a secluded part of the grounds. May followed, and presently they came to a seat in a grass walk on to which the elder lady sank with an air of relief, while May leaned against one of its high, gnarled arms and regarded her companion with a mixture of compassion and curiosity slightly tinged with fear of something very disagreeable being about to happen.

Presently, with a little gasp and a quick movement of her hand to her side as if she were in pain, Mrs. Greg spoke:

"I have brought you here to make a confession, and to speak a warning to you, Miss Meredith. I have learned to feel very warmly toward you. I won't say I have learned to love you—I am not a loving woman to the majority—but I like you very much, and I highly prize your friendship for my daughter; so I am going to speak to you as I should wish another woman to speak to Ella under similar circumstances."

She paused and looked with eager, questioning eyes into May's troubled face. Then, as the girl did not speak, Mrs. Greg went on:

"*My* confession is that I am a dying woman. This you

may say is unimportant to you, but my death may be of sad—the saddest—consequence to you unless you take my warning."

"Why should you think you are dying? You are only overstrained, and so perhaps nervous, from long nursing and anxiety," May said beseechingly.

"Long nursing has had nothing to do with it; long years of anxiety may have accelerated the evil, but they have not caused it. I have known for a very long time that I have an incurable disease. My doctor has never deceived me. I injured my head in falling out of a wagonette many years ago, when I was quite a girl, and though I have looked a hale, strong woman, I have suffered agonies of pain, at more or less brief intervals, ever since. The agony is not confined to my head; but I will not weary you with a description of my ailments. What I want you to understand is that I shall not live long. What I want to guard you against is—a temptation that will surely assail you after my death."

She paused again, but this time she did not look at May. It seemed as if the latter had been turned into stone, so silently and still she stood there, grasping the piece of knotted wood with fingers that ached from the strong tension.

"Now give me your hand—and forgive me for what I am going to say," Mrs. Greg went on; "you know my story and I know yours, my poor, deceived girl——"

"Don't speak of it; I was so, *so* wrong, but I never thought—never suspected——"

"Of course you didn't; I have quite realized that, and as far as you are concerned, your story might be blazoned abroad and could bring you nothing but honor. There is no need for me to speak of my own story. Self-flagellation has no charms for me. My fellow-creatures have done their best in days gone by to show me what sort of punish-

ment *they* think God ought to award me. What I want to tell you is that at my death you will have the temptation offered you of becoming the wife of the man you love; and if you marry him, you will be even more miserable than I have been—if possible."

"I will promise never to see or speak to Mr. Greg again, if you like," May said proudly; "the question of *marriage* with him is utterly out of the question. He has made me ridiculous by allowing me to suppose him unmarried, and though that is the extent of his sin against me——"

"That is *not* the extent of it; he has taught you to love him! He has taught many another woman the same heart-rending lesson, and I have never felt pity for one of them, for there have been vanity and selfishness mixed up with the misery. They have been pleased to be able to show that they had such a fine fellow as pliable in their hands as a bit of floss silk. But with you, it was altogether different. You are neither vain, exacting, nor selfish. You are a noble, true-hearted girl——"

"Take my promise—you *shall!*" May interrupted brokenly. "This bit of happiness at least I can give you. I vow never to see Mr. Greg again."

"Poor child! I am not thinking of myself, or even of him. I am thinking solely of *you*. It's not jealousy of a possible successor that is actuating me. He will probably love half a dozen women when I am gone, and marry one. For your sake, for the sake of the debt I owe you for your goodness to my child, I don't want you to be that one. You would never trust him, knowing how false he has been in heart to me, in your own case. You would always suspect him, and distrust and suspicion would work havoc in a nature like yours. The feeling that he would owe everything to you would make you bear with faults and weaknesses that would wear your heart out. With me it is different; I *sinned for* him, I dare not unlove a being who—who——"

She could not finish her sentence. A deadly faintness overcame her, or a deadlier pain, which was it? The frightened May shrieked aloud in her terror, but there was no one to hear her. The insensible woman had slipped from the seat to the grass, and though May exerted all her strength she could not lift that stiff, senseless form an inch from the ground. In a paroxysm of terror she rushed back to the house, collected four of her servants, and had them carry a sofa out to the spot where Mrs. Greg had fallen, and was still lying senseless.

"She is dead!" May wailed, casting herself down by the side of the unconscious woman in a fit of awful self-abasement. The ghastly thought that she had been the source of additional sorrow to Mrs. Greg would enter into her soul, take possession of it, and rend it. "She is dead!" she cried out, and to herself she added, "And there is no atonement that I can make to her for what I have been the cause of her suffering. I wish I could hate him! I wish her spirit could hear me vow to renounce all *thoughts* of him even. I wish——"

"Ted—I want Ted!" moaned the woman whom May had thought dead, raising herself up on her elbow and glancing wildly round her. "Oh! you here, Miss Meredith! Ah, yes, I remember now. I'm so sorry to give so much trouble," she added piteously, as they carried her on the sofa toward the house, "and—don't frighten Ella."

She closed her eyes and seemed to go to sleep, and so they carried her in and laid her upon her bed, by the side of which May Meredith sat down to watch.

When she woke up three or four hours later she declared herself to be better, but there was a pinched, wan look in her face, and a glazed appearance over her once glorious eyes, that alarmed both girls. She admitted that she was in terrible pain, not only in her head, but internally, and was feverishly anxious to begin making arrangements for her

journey home forthwith. But this proposal was at once negatived by the doctor, who, in answer to Miss Meredith's anxious inquiries, said:

"I confess to being perplexed by her case. I should like to have another opinion; and I think it would be advisable to send for her husband."

"He shall be sent for," May said desperately, feeling that there was no sacrifice of pride or sensitiveness which she could make, that was not due from her to Mrs. Greg.

"Have I your permission to send for him? If so, give me his address, and I will send a telegram to him as I pass through the town, going home. I can word it in a way that will make him understand the exigency of the case without unduly alarming him. Don't tell her he is sent for until we hear that he is coming."

May obeyed these directions implicitly, and for the next three hours strove assiduously and laboriously to divert the suffering woman's thoughts from the husband she was longing to see, by reading to her. At the expiration of that time the eagerly expected wire came, addressed to Ella Poynter: "Am starting; shall be with your mother at seven." The flushed, pain-tormented face grew a shade brighter when Ella read the telegram to her, and she put her feverish hand on May's kindly.

"It was good and like you to send for him," she whispered, and May replied:

"It was not I, it was the doctor."

"It is good of you to let him come; we neither of us deserve such goodness. When he comes you must forgive him."

"I have done that, only I can't forgive myself," May sobbed, and then Mrs. Greg recommenced a fight with such physical agony as distracted her thoughts even from her husband while the paroxysm lasted.

The question of what she should do with herself when Mr. Greg came as a guest to her house, to see his possibly dying wife, would force itself upon May as she sat there watching. Her first impulse was to go away and leave the Gregs and Ella in undisturbed possession of, and authority over the house and establishment. Then it seemed to her, on reflection, that there would be an element of cruelty as well as of cowardice in this course. The position of the man she once loved would be a sufficiently miserable one in her house under the circumstances, without her giving him the additional sting of feeling that his presence, requisite as it was, was unbearable to her. Again, she feared that her flight would look like a confession of weakness. The vanity of man is so colossal that he might think she still cared enough for him to dread seeing him, in spite of her full knowledge of his character and conduct. This reflection decided her. She would stay and let him see that she dared to meet him again, even under the fierce light of the full revelation which had been made to her.

There was something inexpressibly pitiable and touching to her in the way in which his wife tried, as the time approached for his arrival, to mitigate any severity which might be mixed up in May's judgment of him.

"My poor Ted!" she would say pathetically, looking imploringly at May. "You will be kind to him, won't you? He is so proud, and so sensitive, that it will be simply agony for him to face you, knowing how he must have fallen in your esteem."

"He will be too anxious about you to give a thought to me, I feel sure of that," May said generously; "but don't be afraid of my being cool to him. I shall never forget for *one moment* that he is your husband! And remembering that, I can never treat him anything but kindly."

"He has surface faults," Mrs. Greg went on extenuatingly; "*they were fostered* in him by the excessive indul-

gence of his parents when he was a boy; and *I*—well, I must admit I rather encouraged him to think too much of himself, and to believe himself irresistible, until I found that other women were doing the same thing. Then, instead of being gentle and trying to win him back to me, I grew hard and cold apparently. Heaven knows I never was so in reality; but he is sensitive, he needed sympathy and toleration, and perhaps I was not always ready to extend them to him. I want you to understand that, though he has been weak, his is not a wicked nature."

"Dear Mrs. Greg," May said in desperation, "I am ready to believe, I *do* believe anything you like to tell me. I feel sure no one knows and understands him better than you do, and I feel sure, too, that there is no one whose opinion would be of value to him for a moment, while you held a good one of him."

"Will you try to make Ella kind to him?" Ella's mother pleaded earnestly; and May gave her promise that she would do even this, for the sake of giving transient ease to the poor racked mind that dwelt in the rapidly weakening body before her.

Mr. Greg's first feeling on being summoned to his sick wife was one of eager desire to get to her, and comfort her, as he knew he only could comfort her, without an instant's unnecessary delay. But on the journey down he had plenty of time to remember the various incidents which connected him with the bourn to which he was hieing, and to thresh out the subject of several of the possibilities which might ensue from them. It made him smart sharply, in the midst of his miserable anxiety about his wife, to feel that May Meredith must despise him, as she had the power of despising whatever was false, mean, contemptible, and weakly wrong. He dreaded the first glance he should get from the frank, fearless eyes that had looked so lovingly upon him when last they met. He had often condemned himself in an offhand,

unflinching way, but never in the whole course of his life did he feel himself to be such an unmitigated rogue and vagabond as he did when he stepped into the hall of the hushed house, where his wife was lying at the gates of death, he feared.

The light in the hall was low, and for a few moments he was conscious only of the presence and voice of the doctor, who was explaining to him the exact condition of the patient. Then a hearty, womanly voice said to him:

"You are more than welcome, Mr. Greg;" and then a warm, womanly hand took his hesitatingly advanced one, and Ted Greg was nearer lapsing into the weakness of tears than he had ever been in his life!

In the interests of veracity it must be admitted that the remorsefully emotional stage was rapidly passed, and that as Mr. Greg sped upstairs he murmured this brief psalm of thanksgiving:

"Thank God, *that's* over!"

It is scarcely to be wondered at that his wife received him, as well as her failing strength allowed, as if he had been the most loyal, considerate, admirable guide, protector, and husband who ever made a woman's lot a heaven upon earth. He could not help feeling himself to be an exceedingly deserving, as well as lovable fellow, when he met the look of yearning gratitude which leaped into her eyes at sight of him.

"How good of you to come, my own darling!" she said in a gasp. "Ted, it is more than unselfish, it is noble!"

"Don't say anything more about it, darling," he answered hastily, wishing to skip over the subject which might be painful to her, and most certainly was unpleasant to himself, as quickly as possible. Since she had worded it so, he had no doubt she was right. There was something unselfish, and rather noble than otherwise, in his action. Many fellows would have avoided facing a situation that

might have been fraught with mortification for him, if he had shown the moral white feather for a moment, or if Miss Meredith had not been possessed of infinite tact. As it was he had skated over thin ice with skill and pluck, and being on firm land again he was quite ready to forget his delicately slippery experiences.

So he called his wife "his darling," told her "not to say anything more about it," and went down to dinner, after passing an hour of unselfish solicitude by her bedside, with the comforting conviction in his mind that he really was a good stanch fellow, for whose sake any woman might reasonably be excused for nourishing a weak tenderness.

Meanwhile May and Ella had discussed the situation with reservations.

Ella had been out in the garden for a stroll alone. She had gone out with the vague hope in her heart that Sir Walter would call, inquire for, and follow her, for she had informed him of her mother's dangerous illness, and of the expected arrival of his old friend, Ted Greg. It hurt her more than was reasonable that he should not have responded to this note of hers, either by letter or in person. So it was in rather a vexed and litigious frame of mind that she went back into the house after her forlorn ramble.

The day had been bright and sunny, but the evening air was chilly, and she found May drawn up close to a big wood fire in the small anteroom to the drawing room.

"He is here!" the young hostess said, as Ella came in shiveringly and held her hands out to the glowing warmth.

"Why didn't you tell him where I was? Didn't he ask for me?"

"He didn't ask for anyone. He just shook hands with me, heard what the doctor said, and rushed up to your mother's room."

"To *mother's* room! Oh, you mean Mr. Greg has come?"

"Yes; why should he have asked for you? But, Ella, though he didn't, you must remember that there is nothing, nothing, *nothing*, that I won't do, that I can do, to make your mother happier; and she will be happier if I get you to promise that you won't set yourself against him!"

"That's all very well, but civility to him may cost me——" her sentence died off in a mutter of indistinguishable words.

"May cost you what?" May questioned.

"My happiness."

"In what direction?"

"O May, you must guess! I can't say for certain yet, but I feel *almost* sure that Sir Walter St. Austle is very fond of me, and you know how proud and honorable the St. Austles are. He is relentless toward men of Mr. Greg's stamp, you know."

"Really!" May said incredulously, as she could not help remembering that Walter St. Austle had never been "relentless toward Mr. Greg," until the encumbering Mrs. Greg had come upon the scene. Nor could she blot the fact out of her memory that Walter St. Austle had commenced showing the symptoms which to Ella betokened "fondness," while his own wife was still alive. But "nice customs courtesy to great kings." Sir Walter St. Austle was a great king in these parts. Circumstances had combined to tone down the warm coloring, and smooth off the jagged edges of anything like a premature display of feeling on his part. On the other hand, circumstances had been as destructively ensnaring as consequences had been pitiless, to Ted Greg. The strong sense she had of the human injustice of the judgment given, and the sentence promulgated, by Sir Walter through Ella, made her (May) more inclined to take a chivalrously lenient view of the faulty Ted than ever. After the manner of women she rushed from one extreme to the other, judging him all the more graciously, now, because she

had once felt harshly toward him, and because other people were ready to indorse and abide by her harshest judgment.

"He is no more worst of the worse as they think him, than he was the best of the best, as I once believed," she told herself as she watched Ted come in at the door and cross the drawing room toward her. He was in evening dress. She had kept on the Harris tweed costume which she had worn while trying to walk off her excitement and tire out her feelings all the afternoon. It would have chimed in more harmoniously with the sad strain to which her thoughts were setting themselves, if he had not dressed with such conventional and fastidious care this night.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BRIEF BRIGHTNESS.

TAKING into consideration the strongly condemnatory views which she knew he held about her mother, Ella was rather more surprised than gratified the next day when Sir Walter St. Austle appeared with the avowed object of "calling on Greg.'"

He made the announcement that he had come on this polite mission quite as if it were what they must all have expected him to do ; and when Ella smiled in a hostile way, and laboriously endeavored to look as if she neither cared for his presence nor for the object that had brought him, he looked and felt perplexed at her contrariness.

"I will go up to mother and send Mr. Greg down to you," she said stiffly ; and when she had stalked out of the room with an outer air of huff rather than dignity, and an inner pain of bitter consciousness of, and revolt at the injustice and inequality of many things, he turned to May, inquiring :

"What is it now, May? She is hard to please, the dear little thing. A reproachful vein ran through the whole of her note yesterday, evidently because I hadn't rushed over to make personal inquiries for her mother. To-day I call on Greg, pay him the first attention it's in my power to pay him, in fact, and she meets me like an iceberg. She's awfully hard to please."

"Is it your first object to please her?"

"Indeed it is."

"Then you will soon find out the way, and it's the best and highest way, Walter, believe me. I don't want to pose as guide, philosopher, and friend to either Ella or you. But I will just say this: she's in quite the right road now, and if you help her along it, the love she will give you by and by will be better worth having than the vapory, vanity-inspired sentiment she has for you now."

"A fellow must make concessions to public opinion and the wishes of his family—at least a fellow must who is in my position——"

"And you find that public opinion and the wishes of your family demand that you should be lenient to a strong man who has erred, and inexorable to the weak woman who has erred with him? I have found the same thing, but being only a weak woman myself I haven't conceded to these demands."

"You receive Greg and are very friendly with him. That's for ancient kindness' sake, I suppose?"

"No, it's not," May said steadily; "it's because *she* would rather die a dozen deaths than see him receive a single slight. Can't you understand that I, of all women in the world, must be the last to pain her through him?"

"Unless rumor lies more freely than usual, he has given you cause enough to justify you in giving not only him, but everyone connected with him, as much pain as they can conveniently carry."

"Then rumor does lie more freely than usual."

"But, May, you are not going to quixotically deny that he was rascal enough to pose as an unmarried man, and lead you on to give yourself away to a certain extent?"

"If you think him such a rascal, why are you inconsistent enough to pay him the compliment of calling on him at the earliest opportunity? If you think Mrs. Greg has sinned beyond forgiveness in having gone on loving him, and sticking to him through years of neglect and misery, why don't you turn up your nose at me for having loved him without *half* the provocation he gave her to do it?"

"Well! as you put it, the question's a hard one to answer. In my own mind I can draw the line sharply between the two cases. She went over the border, and you didn't."

"I see," May said thoughtfully; "with you good, honorable men of the world, it's the result only that you pass judgment on, and forgive or condemn, as the case may be. A married woman may neglect her husband and home and flirt outrageously with another man. But unless the husband denounces her, the world does not despise her, though it knows well that she is no less to blame than is the one who is imprudent enough to get herself denounced and lose her husband's protection. And a girl who is well off—as I am—may make a confiding fool of herself, as I did! and because the result is only pain to myself, no one has the pluck to stand forward and say to me, 'May Meredith, many as good a girl as yourself has gone to destruction through having been lured by her love into trusting to a man too thoroughly. It was only your money that made the road back passable to you. Remember that fact, when you are inclined to judge penniless, and therefore powerless women harshly.' I should respect anyone who said that to me, Walter."

"No one would dare to say it to you. I'd like to have *the handling* of anyone who dared think it of you, even," he

said hotly. May was so much like a sister to him that, as a man of the world, of moral repute, he felt indignant to the last degree with her for taking up a merely human and womanly position on such a question.

"I say it to myself often enough," May went on; "I say it every time I see *found-out* women scouted, and penniless poor sinners cast back into the slough of despond by hard social hands, or by those better-intentioned Christian ones that can't resist bruising before they try to heal. Whenever I see these things, I dare say to myself, 'It is through no goodness, power, or strength of my own that I am unsullied still. God surrounded me with barriers I could not break, and denied me opportunities that I could take. He has been more merciful to me than he has been to others; but because his mercy has been greater, that does not make me a better woman. It only points out the fact that I am a more fortunate one.'"

"If I could feel sure that Ella inherited more of her father's character than her mother's," he began hesitatingly, then paused and looked interrogatively at May.

"What would you do in that case?" she asked.

"Make her my wife, and insist on her having no further communication with her mother."

May winced as if a blow had fallen upon her.

"You would start by trying to make her a cruel, ungrateful daughter, as a preparation for becoming a good, true wife and mother. If you succeeded in making her give and keep such a promise, I wouldn't give much for your prospect of happiness, Walter."

"Then I had better see as little as possible of Ella in the future. I'm getting far too fond of the little girl to feel satisfied with being on merely friendly terms, and I flatter myself she feels the same about me," he said gloomily. Half-unconsciously he had counted on May's co-operation in the matter. She had behaved generously herself to Mrs.

Greg, but he had believed all along that underlying the generosity was a stratum of womanly jealousy, which would cause her to feel resigned, at least, to seeing Mrs. Greg castigated by other hands. Consequently he now felt disappointed at her blunt refusal to sympathize with and support him. If she had backed him up, her influence with Ella would have been invaluable in molding Ella to his will. As it was, she feared she would work against him, if he did finally try to bribe Ella away from her mother by the offer of his hand.

Poor Ella herself was as unhappy as only a girl who has let her whole heart go out to a man whose intentions fluctuate, and who is in dire uncertainty himself about them, can be. The fictitious improvement which had taken place in her mother's condition had relieved the girl's mind of the counterbalancing anxiety, and now she had nothing to distract her mind from the contemplation of the possibilities that Walter's manner placed before her.

This day, after his conversation with May, his manner was distinctly puzzling and distressing. He was thoughtful, cool, preoccupied, ill at ease. She had gone into the library to look for a book to read to her mother, and to her surprise she had found him alone; she having been under the impression that she had heard his voice in the hall, saying good-by, at least ten minutes ago.

"I thought it was Greg," he said hurriedly.

"And I thought you were gone," she retorted. "Haven't you seen Mr. Greg yet? I sent him down half an hour since."

"Oh, yes, I've seen him; he is going back with me to Trelyn."

"Is he?" Her eyes flashed and her color rose. She almost hated Sir Walter at the moment. It was brutal of him to show marked attention to Mr. Greg, while he never *so much* as inquired for her mother.

"The spin will do him good. He tells me he hasn't been out of the house for three days," Sir Walter went on awkwardly.

"Three days is not a long time to devote to someone who has devoted herself to him for twenty years."

"No, no! of course not. He didn't put it in that way at all; in fact, I had to use a good deal of persuasion to induce him to come at all. You're looking fagged, too, Ella," he added, with a sudden remorseful pang of tenderness. "I shall come and prescribe a drive for you to-morrow, and take you out myself."

Her wistful eyes lifted themselves slowly to his.

"Why do you propose it so elaborately, Walter? Other days you have just come and taken me out, as if it was quite natural that we should go out together. Why are you stiffer to-day?"

"I'm not stiff. I'll tell you to-morrow—that is, if you'll go with me," he said incoherently; and then Mr. Greg came in ready to start for the drive, and looking in almost jubilant spirits. His wife had sped his parting steps in a cheery way that made him feel as if he were doing her a personal favor in going out and getting fresh air in congenial society, and in a way that was very pleasant. She had more self-control than her daughter had attained to, and would not permit Ted or anyone else to perceive that she was a little hurt at his so eagerly grasping the hand that was so coldly withheld from her. So she had smiled upon and encouraged him, and his volatile soul was as free from any kind of self-accusation as an infant's.

"I think there's every chance of my poor wife pulling through after all," he said, as they drove away from Belhaven, speaking with as perfect an air of confidence in his friend St. Austle's sympathy as if the latter had known of the marriage all along.

"I am sure she has had every care and attention from Miss

Meredith, and the Belhaven sanitary arrangements are notoriously good. I often think that things would have turned out differently for me, if the drainage at Trelyn had been quite as perfect as over here."

"Ah, well, we can't avert the inevitable," Mr. Greg said, beginning his remark with impressive gravity, and ending it with an air of displaying cheerfulness under trying circumstances, that was quite edifying. "I've always been an unlucky devil myself," he went on blithely, "but I believe the tide is going to turn now. I've dropped on to one or two very good things lately in the City, and I shall work with a freer hand in future—I mean I shall have less scruple in leaving my wife when business calls me away, now that she will have her daughter to keep her company."

"Is Ella going back with you?" Sir Walter asked grudgingly. Under the circumstances he knew himself to be unwise in expressing any interest in Ella's movements. But he felt the interest keenly, and he had never learned the lesson of keeping his feelings under control.

"Oh, yes, she goes back with us. And a very charming addition she will be to our home circle. She hasn't got my wife's beauty, or cleverness, or fascination, but she's a dear, pretty little girl, and a devoted daughter."

Ted Greg said these last words quite piously. It struck him as being very much to his own credit that other people should be devoted to Marian now. He could not keep down the conviction that he must be a remarkably clever fellow, when for his sake people were so kind to his wife.

"Here's Guy coming to meet us," Sir Walter said, glad of the opportunity of shying off from the subject of Ella. "You know my brother, don't you? Awfully clever chap, has made his mark as a dramatist after having knocked about and got a lot of experience as a war correspondent; married to a very charming woman since you were here

last; I think you met her, by the way, a widow, a—a——" Sir Walter had inadvertently stumbled into the stony path of truthful explanation before he remembered to whom he was speaking. When he did remember, falter, and halt, Ted Greg came to his aid magnanimously but leisurely.

"To be sure, I met her at Trelyn last year; a remarkably nice woman I thought her. You were going to tell me she was Poynter's widow? I knew that when I was here last, and I thought then what a long-suffering angel she must have been, to have existed with Poynter all the years she did."

"She has never had the bad taste to discuss her former husband with any of us, you may be sure," Sir Walter had time to say icily, before Guy came up and joined them. It wasn't his place to turn the cold shoulder on Greg any more than on any other invited guest of Walter's, Guy reminded himself; besides, Greg was a splendid sportsman all round, a crack rider, a capital shot and polo player, and a fine swordsman. As a man's man he was rarely equaled, and Guy had never heard of his being excelled. Accordingly Mr. Greg found himself well and pleasantly welcomed and treated by the Trelyn men, and it did not affect him very much that Mrs. St. Austle looked askance at him, and only addressed him to make warm and interested inquiries for his wife and Ella.

"The evening of my life bids fair to be its happiest time," Mrs. Greg said fondly to her daughter the next day, when Ella was moving about the room setting fresh flowers in vases where her mother's eyes could light upon them without effort, arranging the little daintily white-draped table by the side of the bed with the books and lavender salts, the eau de cologne, fan, paper knife, grapes, bowl of violets, and a dozen other trifles which tend to make a prolonged stay in bed not only endurable but pleasant.

"What makes you say that, mother, dear?" the girl asked, perching on the side of the bed and smoothing back the silky hair which she had just dressed from Mrs. Greg's forehead.

"Because I feel I shall have you with me always now. No one waits on me as you do, Ella. You know what I want before I am quite sure myself that I want it. It's so restful to me to see you in the room."

"You will have me with you always," Ella cried impulsively, "and every day I shall know better how to wait on you, dear, and to anticipate your wants and wishes. Dear mother! we shall be so happy together."

She was thinking of Walter as she spoke. That *if* he came out that day he would say something that she had been pining to hear for a long time, she felt sure, and when she had promised to be quite his own, she would tell him that she wanted her mother to have that dear little house near Trelyn which he had once lent to the Davises, in order that she (Ella) might be with her daily. The little cloud, which hung between the two people she loved so dearly, would soon melt away when once Ella was in the position to speak freely of one to the other.

"Before to-night mother will feel that she has a son to cling to as long as she lives, as well as a daughter," Ella told herself hopefully, but she wisely abstained from expatiating on or even distantly alluding to these hopes until Walter's own words should have turned them into certainties. To her inexperienced eyes, this rally which Mrs. Greg had made indicated a permanent recovery. Everything looked bright around her, now, compared with the dark, doubtful past. Walter and Mr. Greg were such friends already that there would be no difficulty, as far as he was concerned, in the way of the institution of the most intimate relations; and for her own part she made up her mind to try and like Ted, as *nothing* short of her doing so would satisfy and make her

mother happy. The only bit of dullness in the social atmosphere about her that was visible to her happy, hopeful young eyes was that May seemed bent on leading a solitary life. But, after all, time was young yet, and even if May did obstinately decide on a solitary life, it would never be a sad one while she had Belhaven and her horses and dogs. So even that little bit of dullness was dispersed by the sunshine that filled her heart when a message was brought to her that Sir Walter St. Austle was waiting to see her in the drawing room.

She found time to scan herself scrutinizingly in the glass, and to stoop over and kiss her mother as she asked: "Do I look fit to go out in the smartest tandem with the most fastidious man in the county, mother?" before she ran down and met him in a room flooded with bright, warm, young spring sunshine.

CHAPTER XXX.

POOR WOMAN!

PROBABLY there is not a man of the better sort who does not feel horribly nervous and painfully conscious of his shortcomings and general unworthiness, when he is about to ask a girl to give herself into his keeping, and submit herself to his rule only, for the remainder of their joint lives.

At any rate, this was the case with Sir Walter St. Austle this day, and in addition to this natural and praiseworthy sensation of humility, there was also an aching consciousness of meanness. He was not only going to ask this girl to be his wife, but he was going to ask her to do something when she became his wife, which would be to the pandering of his pride and to the deterioration of her character.

"I was sure you would come," she said frankly, the

moment she got into the room; "the day is so lovely and bright, and mother is so *much* better. I felt sure you would come."

"I *told* you I should come, and I always keep my promises; nothing else has anything to do with my coming," he said quickly. Then seeing that she looked taken down and disappointed, he added:

"We St. Austles pride themselves a bit, you know, on *never* doing anything shady or evasive, and on going straight to our point, whatever unpleasantness may be in that straight path. You know that, don't you, Ella?"

"I know that!" she said wonderingly, and her eyes dilated till they seemed all pupil and appeared to divide her straight set brow from her nervously mobile mouth and sensitive little nose.

"Ella, you know why I am here to-day?"

He had taken both of her hands, and she was standing at arm's length from him, her head slightly thrown back.

Not a word from her; no sign that she understood him, unless the deepening of the dilated pupils of her eyes might have been taken as one. She was evidently not going to smooth his path for him.

"You have known, I'm sure, for a long time that you're very dear to me, Ella. I believe you saved my life some time ago, when I was in great trouble, and you were the only one I could speak to about that trouble. You were my darling little friend before I became your lover. I want you to be more than my darling little friend now, I want you to be my darling wife."

As he said the last word she wrung her hands out of his and sprang to him, her arms around his neck, her lips put up to meet his in a moment.

"I'm *too* happy! Walter, I love you so much; but are you *sure* you'll never repent? What is there in me? Why *should I* have this joy when there are so many cleverer,

nicer, *prettier* women in the world who would be glad of you?"

He had thought the same thing himself several times, when he had been out of reach of her personal influence. But that she should word this sentiment of utter humility, she who was by nature and through the antagonistic conditions under which she had been brought up, rather arrogant, struck him as being infinitely pathetic.

"But having once known you, my darling, I could never be glad of *them*. In my eyes you're cleverer, nicer, and prettier than any other woman in the world."

"Ah! no, Walter; now that I *know* you love me I throw away all my vanity and conceit, and dare to see myself as others see me. I know I am only a moderately good looking girl with rather an expressive face. But what do my looks matter when you love me for them? or in spite of them, which is it?"

"It's a woman's heart I think of, not her face," Sir Walter said magnanimously, and in spite of the heroic way in which she had thrown aside all vanity and conceit, she felt a trifle taken down when he so calmly accepted her lowly estimate of her own charms, and acquiesced in it without protest.

"My heart has been yours for a long time, Walter, well and truly yours. I thought it was friendship at first when you were in trouble," she went on with a furious blush. "Idiot that I was, not to have known that friendship wouldn't have set my heart beating like a sledge-hammer, every time I heard your horses' hoofs coming up the drive. Your horses have such a speaking trot. It shows how sympathetic they must be with you, the dears! that I can tell your mood, from the sound of their stepping, before you come in. Yesterday they sounded uncertain, and I knew you were not quite happy, and were unsettled about something. But to-day they rang like silver, and I felt my heart a mere featherweight when the message was brought to me

that *you* were waiting for me. Yesterday it seemed probable that I might be parted from you, but now——"

She checked herself abruptly in the midst of her rapturous flow of words, but the smile that lighted up her brilliant little face, as he bent and kissed her, "filled the silence like a speech."

"And now it will be your own fault if you are ever parted from me more than a few hours again."

"Then be sure that I shall never commit the fault that will part us," she laughed out happily. "What made you care for me, Walter? If it had been any other man, I should have taken it as only a proper tribute to my worthy merits. But *you!* I *am* lucky. What will your brother Guy and his wife think when they hear I am going to be Lady St. Austle, *your wife!*"

It rather jarred on his finer taste that she should have thought of the title first. But the jarring sensation soon passed away as he reflected that it was only another proof of her absolute sincerity and ingenuousness.

"Guy will approve, on one condition, about which I shall speak to you by and by. Now, my darling, put on your finest war paint and come out; the horses are looking lovely to-day. I've got a brother of the Promise of May's in as leader. I must teach you to drive tandem, Ella; you'd look awfully smart handling the reins with such a pair as I have in to-day."

"I'm too happy! To think that *you* should be planning what we will *do together* with your horses——"

"'All that's mine is thine, lassie,'" he quoted; then, with a sudden greedy desire to get her all to himself, he added: "Make haste with the war paint. Where is May? We'll tell her before we start."

"Of *course* we will, but mother must be told first. I will run up and tell her, and ask her to see you. Walter, she *will be so* happy. I know the thought of what might become

of me when she is gone—*if* she goes, which I feel she won't do yet, now that all things are so much brighter—worries her terribly."

"Wait a moment."

The tone more than the words arrested her flying feet, and brought her back smilingly, but just a little puzzled, to his side.

"Is there any occasion to say anything to your mother this morning? Wait till after our drive; tell her when I am gone home. I hate a fuss about anything when fuss can be avoided."

The smile had faded from Ella's face, and she looked more puzzled than before.

"My mother is not one to make a 'fuss' about anything. She will bear happiness as quietly as she has borne misery—poor darling!"

"I'm glad to hear that," he said heartily; "the fact is, I don't want to do anything to excite her unnecessarily, or put any uncalled-for tension on her nerves. I know how ill she is, I know how precarious her condition is; why should she be subjected to the gratuitous agitation of an interview with me, now that you and I have settled what we mean to do?"

"But she must see you and know you, Walter. She is not too ill to take an interest in the lightest thing that concerns me, and when it comes to this, the most important event of my life—oh! my mother must be the first to know it, the first to wish me joy, the first to hear that she is to have a son, as well as a daughter, to love her."

"That's nonsense!" he exclaimed abruptly; "I am not a sentimental boy ready to register any number of idiotic vows of fealty to my future wife's family. I am a man with a man's heavy responsibilities upon me. I am the trustee for the honor and reputation of a honored name. My wife must help me to discharge the duties of that trusteeship in all their integrity."

She nodded her head slowly. "Tell me exactly what you mean and what you want me to do, Walter, before I register any idiotic vows of absolute, blind obedience to my future husband's orders. I am not a sentimental girl, any more than you are a sentimental boy, though I have not the advantage of being the trustee for the honor and reputation of an honored name."

"What a dear, little, dignified spitfire it can be," he said, trying to look amused; "we're wasting time, my darling; go and get the war paint on."

"When you have told me exactly what you want me to do —what you *mean* me to do—I'll go."

"I want you to tell your mother, by and by, that you are going to marry me, that we love each other very truly and steadily, and that it will be for your happiness in your new sphere that she should show herself a really loving, sensible, and reasonable mother by abstaining from the attempt to hold any further relations with you after your marriage."

"That is all you want?"

"That's all, my darling," he said heartily; feeling himself to be a very liberal-minded fellow, and Ella a dear, docile, little thing.

"You only want me to be an unnatural daughter, and to ask my mother to be an unnatural parent? Well, I suppose that's not much for the trustee for the honor and reputation of an honored name to ask of a little nobody."

"You put it rather cynically, my darling, but, seriously speaking, it is *not* asking much."

"You must ask—the trifle—of some other woman."

She turned away from him and walked steadily to the door before he could recover from his surprise sufficiently to speak.

"You are mad to throw away your happiness and mine in this way"—he stepped hastily after her and laid his hand on hers as she was turning the door handle—"after what has

passed between us! I have held you in my arms, kissed you as I would not have dared to do if I had not *known* that you were going to be my wife soon. You can't throw aside and blot out the memory of this last hour, and of all the love we have lavished on each other in it, because I ask you to give up one whom you have never known, and never cared for till quite recently."

"Don't try to tempt me to stab her and desert her," Ella cried, putting her hands up to her face to shut out the sight of his handsome, harassed, pained face. "If you do," she went on fiercely, "when you are old and dying, a child you love will hurt and leave you! Don't try to tempt me—for your own sake, not for mine—for nothing that you can say will take me from my mother, now."

"Confounded ass I've been, and a d—d mess I've made of it by being so prematurely honest. A more cunning or cautious fellow would have waited till she was his wife to offer her the pill," he grumbled to himself. He was bitterly hurt, mortified, and angry. It had seemed to him such a little thing that Ella should, at his request, and on account of various reasons which delicacy forbade his enlarging upon to her, give up a woman to whom personally he was profoundly indifferent, but who had sinned against society's elastic law. Her sin against God and morality he would have been kind and forgiving to, if only it had not been found out by that section of the world in which it was essential a Lady St. Austle should hold her head high and be of speckless repute.

Hurt, mortified, and angry as he was, he was not despairing. When Ella got over her tantrums, and looked the situation calmly and dispassionately in the face, she would realize the extent of the suicidal folly she had tried to commit. "In all probability," he reflected, "she will tell her mother, and if a real mother's heart beat in Mrs. Greg's breast, she will influence her daughter in the right way, and

point out that my conditions are only just and reasonable. And Ella will be glad to be convinced," he told himself exultantly, "for, there's no doubt of it, the little girl is awfully fond of me!"

Not caring to meet any member of the household just then, he went out through the open window, and round to the stable yard, to order his tandem himself. On his way through the thicket-path at the end of the house he met May, who had been constraining herself to keep out of the way till Ella was free and ready to impart the great news, for May had quite fathomed the meaning of Sir Walter's confessed special call on Miss Poynter. But now, when she met him, though he assumed a feather-hearted air, May saw that there was something wrong.

"I thought you would have stayed to luncheon with us, Walter," she began. "Why are you running away so soon?"

"I wanted to take Ella for a drive, but it didn't come off, so there was nothing to do but to come away," he said, and in spite of his utmost efforts there was a touch of chagrin and disappointment in his tone.

"Was her mother worse?" May asked anxiously.

"Not that I'm aware of."

He spoke stiffly, and May asked quickly:

"Surely if Ella was called away from you suddenly, you inquired the reason, didn't you?"

"Indeed I did not; she was not called away. She left me suddenly in that pettish, spasmodic manner which has its attractions when it's brought to bear on others, but not when shown to one's self."

"I have seen nothing of that pettish and spasmodic manner lately; never, indeed, since she has been under her mother's influence, and the influence of her love for her mother. What a wonderfully softening effect Mrs. Greg has had upon her daughter! No one knows it better, or so as I do."

"It's a pity she didn't stay at home and exert that influence from Ella's childhood," he grumbled.

"A great pity—poor woman!" May said sorrowfully.

"She has had her whistle; she must expect to pay for it. We all have to, as Guy says!"

"Has Guy paid for his? Have you for yours?"

"Come now, May, you can't, with any show of truth or reason, imply that Guy or I have had a whistle that we weren't perfectly ready to pay the fullest price for in the light of day."

"Guy has been a very prudent man, and you have been a very lucky one, Walter," she said thoughtfully, for her mind was full of sad sympathy with the imprudent, unlucky husband and wife who were her guests under such painfully strained conditions.

It was on his tongue to tell her that what she glibly spoke of as his "luck," was his straightforward pursuance of the path which an honorable man of good family position and means is bound, and finds it practically best to tread. But May's attention was diverted from even his opening sentence by the sight of her old man-servant hurrying toward her as fast as his rheumatic legs would carry him.

"Will you come to Miss Ella, ma'am? her ma don't know her, and can't speak. The young lady's like one gone dotty!"

"Walter, send—— No; go yourself for the doctor *this minute*," May shouted as she ran off, and three minutes later Sir Walter St. Austle found himself riding as hard as he could in search of medical assistance for the woman whom he had been trying to obliterate out of her daughter's life, and hoping that he might be in time for that assistance to be of use.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UNCONVENTIONAL.

MORE than a year had passed since Sir Walter St. Austle had ridden in haste and in vain for the medical aid which would have been useless even when he started on his mission. Mrs. Greg had died suddenly, peacefully—and happily, it may be hoped—within ten minutes of Ella's return to the bedside. The girl had schooled her features to show no sign of distress or agitation as she came up to her mother's side with some fruit and flowers, which would, she knew, seem doubly sweet to the invalid from the fact of their having been gathered by Ted Greg. But it was destined that their sweetness should not be tasted by the one for whom they had been gathered. She was raising herself with a smile to take the bunch of old-fashioned crimson and pink monthly roses from Ella's hand, when she fell back white, and "faint," the girl thought. A spasm of pain passed over her face, to be quickly succeeded by a smile of such absolute peace and content as had not irradiated it for many a weary year. Then her eyes closed gently, and with her hands clasped in Ella's, her life struggle was over.

It was more than a year ago that this, which could not be called a calamity, had come to pass. During these months May Meredith had devoted herself entirely to Ella's care and consolation, for after her mother's death the girl had sunk into a low state of health, and May judged rightly enough that her despondency was not solely due to the loss of her mother. But whatever the source of her grief might have been, she kept a strict silence about it, and tacitly imposed the same restraint on others. She "was not well enough to see anyone," she said when the Trelyn Towers people called, and Walter sent her a significant message through May. She "was not well enough or clear-headed

enough to write," she declared, when a long, pleading, self-excusing letter from Sir Walter reached her. Death had stepped in and apparently crushed out of her heart all love for and thought of the living. She had one consolation which she hugged closely to her heart. Her mother had never known how subtly the man she loved had tried to tempt her from her mother's side, and make her weed that mother out of her life.

Mr. Greg had been shocked into stone, apparently, by the death of his wife. There had been no wild outburst when the startling intelligence had first been broken, but he had cased himself mentally in iron, and held aloof from everyone. As soon as the funeral was over he had sent a brief note of thanks to Miss Meredith for her great goodness, and taken his departure without seeing either her or Ella. And May had honored him for his avoidance of herself, for had she not been the innocent cause of his fall from his allegiance and loyalty to his wife?

She was a healthy minded girl, but though she would not allow herself to dwell morbidly on the recollection of her brief love dream, there were times when she could not keep the memory of that happy time in which her little romance had been played at bay. She had forgiven Ted for the deception he had practiced on her completely and entirely, telling herself, as loving women will, that it was his *love for her* which had led him to take the downward dishonorable path. Away at the bottom of that deceitful and desperately wicked organ, her heart, there lurked a hope that in time, when his wound was healed a little, he would seek her "in friendship at least, if in friendship only" again. But when months had passed away and he still made no effort to do so, she told herself that it was all over—all over indeed—and felt ashamed of having hoped that his feelings of remorse and regret for his dead wife had been blunted in any degree.

For Ella's sake she had wrenched herself away from Belhaven, and the thousand and one occupations and amusements she made for herself there, and tried the effect of constant change on the bruised spirit of the girl, who would not evenly tacitly admit that she had any other cause for depression than the loss of her mother just as she had come to know and love her.

It was noticeable that Ella was always better in body, and brighter in mind when she was away from Belhaven. She attributed this satisfactory condition to the fact of her having there been brought face to face with death for the first time. But May knew better. She fathomed that it was the vicinity of the living lover, rather than the shadow of the dead mother, which clouded over Ella's spirit, dimmed her glorious eyes with frequent unshed tears, and depressed her into a state of lassitude and indifference.

"Shall we start on an unconventional wandering tour, Ella?" May proposed one day when Ella had been sitting, brush in hand, for an hour gazing vacantly at a miniature she had commenced weeks ago, and had not the heart or desire apparently, to finish. It was only a copy of one of May's ancestresses—a delicate-looking creature, with eyes larger than her rosebud of a mouth and a complexion that can only be reproduced on ivory.

"One can't wander, or do anything else, unconventionally in this conventional and prosaic age," Ella grumbled, though she was secretly delighted at the idea of getting away from Belhaven. "We can only go in railway carriages, and put up at hotels, like everybody else."

"We won't travel in railway carriages, nor put up at hotels. I will drive my cobs in the wagonette, and we will just follow any road we fancy, and put up at night in any village we chance to come to, where we can get a bed in a cottage or in a roadside inn. We will take a hamper of *provisions*, and eat them by the roadside, or by a river, and

when the hamper is exhausted we will find our way to a town and fill it again. You take a sketchbook, and I will take books, and we will trust to chance to direct us where to go and where to stop. Does the plan commend itself to you?"

Yes! the plan commended itself very highly to Ella. She pictured Sir Walter's chagrin when he found she was really gone without having made one sign of forgiveness, and the picture was pleasant to her. He had tried to make her faithless to her mother! He could never really have loved her, or he would not have done this; consequently it was only just that he should be punished through his pride, and made to understand that his will was not law to her, at least.

"I long to get out of the land of Tre, Pol, and Pen," she said, when they were starting. "Turn the horses' heads up country, May. I shall feel happier when we have crossed the Tamar."

"Shall we explore Dartmoor, and then push on into North Devon and look up the red deer in the Doones' land?" May asked.

"Now you're marking out a route in your own mind, and we agreed to go where chance led us," Ella protested. She had no fancy for revisiting Lynton and Lynmouth, or any of the places where she had first met Guy St. Austle in the company of her stepmother. It humiliated her, now, to remember that she had once liked Guy so well that she had plotted and descended to meanness and trickery in order to win him from Mrs. Poynter. She had learnt the lesson from Walter since of what real love was, and it made her smart to think that she had ever degraded the passion by pretending it was *that* she felt for Guy.

The first day's journey was a brilliant success. It landed them without much difficulty at Liskeard, where they stayed the night in the best inn's best rooms. The atmosphere had

been perfect, the sun bright, the roads not too dusty, and the glorious woods that bordered their way, on either side for many miles, in "verdure clad." The second day left a little more to wish for. A light drizzle fell without ceasing for several hours. One of the cobs had taken a chill in the stable the previous night. The other one stepped on a broken ginger beer bottle early in the day and lamed himself slightly. They had miscalculated the effects of fresh air for hours continuously on their appetites, and so their provisions ran short, and the viands in the village shops which they passed at rare intervals were not tempting. When, very much in the gloaming, they reached the ferry-boat which plies between Cornwall and Devon, their spirits were low and their nerves fatigued, and they realized with deep but repressed satisfaction that they would very shortly be in Plymouth, and able to install themselves in a conventional and exceedingly comfortable hotel.

"The hostler says that Gay Lad's shoe must come off, and his foot have several days' rest before he will be fit for work again," May told her companion when they sat down at last to a late supper at the Royal Hotel.

"What a bore," Ella said mechanically; but a moment after she added: "After all it's lucky the breakdown has taken place in Plymouth. What should we have done if it had happened in an out of the way hole of a village, where we might have had to put up in an unsavory cottage, or an even more revolting pub.?"

"Yes, this is more conventional than we bargained for when we started, but it's more comfortable," May assented, "and after all, it's not choice, but necessity, that will keep us here in the madding throng for a few days. Poor Gay Lad is far too dear to have his precious foot trifled with."

"We can easily get away from the madding throng," Ella said, looking up from the local map which she had been studying attentively between the courses of the meal, that

was less frugal than they had determined on having when making out their programme. "We ean easily get up on Dartmoor, and stalk about among the gorse and heather, and find some wild farmhouse where we can get milk and bread baked over a peat fire. Shall we ask for the paper, May, dear, and see what is going on at the theaters?"

They were soon both of them looking out the advertisements of current entertainments, and May's sympathetic eyes lighted directly upon one in which horses figured prominently.

"Oh! see, Ella, this will be charming, I am sure. 'To-morrow, Tuesday, at 3 P. M. and 8 P. M. Horse training and breaking extraordinary by Edward Edwards, Esq., the champion breaker and trainer. Any horse, however strong, spirited, or vicious, warranted to be broken in by a process known only to Mr. Edwards; tamed and ridden within twenty minutes or half an hour at most. There are no ropes or any other appliances used in the process, which is simply one of the most indomitable courage, strength, and skill.'"

"We'll go and see that, won't we?" May said, her face beaming with excitement and pleasurable anticipation. "I always wished I could have seen Rarey, but everyone says that he used chloroform in training his horses. This man uses nothing, but 'courage, strength, and skill.'"

"You won't give up Dartmoor for it, will you?"

"Oh, no! We will do Dartmoor all day, and horse-training at eight in the evening. I am longing for to-morrow night to come, aren't you?"

"Well! I'm only moderately impatient about it," Ella laughed; "it never occurred to me that to see a man break in a horse was much of a spectacle."

"It must be a fine sight, doing it as he is said to do it," May said enthusiastically.

"Supposing the strong, spirited, and vicious horse masters and hurts him?"

"I won't contemplate such a dismal possibility."

"Perhaps he will turn out to be one of Buffalo Bill's cowboys?"

"I don't care who he will turn out to be. He won't be a cowboy, I am sure, or he would call himself a 'Colonel' with a lot of initials before his name, instead of the simple 'Esquire' after it."

Ella looked thoughtful for a few moments. When she spoke it was to say:

"I once heard Walter St. Austle speak of a man he knew who could throw a horse, however strange or strong, without a bridle or halter. Sir Walter admired him very much for it."

"What was Walter's friend's name?"

"I've—forgotten," Ella said hesitatingly, and coloring faintly. "I am going to bed now to dream of Dartmoor ponies and peat-baked bread."

"And I to dream of restive horses subdued by a man's indomitable courage, strength, and skill," said May, with her cheeks glowing and eyes sparkling with joyful expectancy.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A WOMAN'S VOICE.

WHILE May was inspecting her cobs in their loose boxes the next morning, Ella went out to explore as much as she could of the town before the train was due, which was to take them to one of the most beautiful bits of woodland and river scenery in Devonshire—Bickleigh Vale. She also wished, if she could do it without trouble, to find out something more about the gentleman horse-breaker in whose performance May was taking so much interest. Such an "*instinctively* strong interest," Ella called it to herself, and

yet she could not analyze the reason why she called the interest "instinctive."

Large posters were up in various places, and a string of sandwich men were bearing about large-lettered and alarmingly illustrated representations of the contests between man and beasts, in various blood-curdling attitudes. But Ella felt sure that the brawny, highly colored Hercules sprawling about on these posters was a villainous caricature, and therefore gave her no clew to the real appearance of the man. She could not define why she felt curious about the personality of this stranger. But curious she did feel, and it was borne in upon her that, when she saw him, he would not be an utter stranger to her.

In one of the shops she entered to make some trifling purchase, she heard a lady customer discoursing on the same subject that was filling her (Ella's) mind to one of the shop girls.

"Mr. Edwards is a friend, or rather an acquaintance of mine," she said, laughing consciously; and then, looking rather disappointed that the girl behind the counter betrayed no further interest in the matter, she added, "Such a handsome man he is, and such a perfect gentleman. I don't wonder at the place being crowded every day and every night to see him risk his life, the dear fellow."

"I hear all the ladies are running after him, but he seems to be more for his horses than for the ladies," the girl said indifferently.

"I don't know about *that*," assuming a look of annoyance and severity in a moment; "he is devoted to his horses, but that does not prevent him being devoted to ladies, or at least to one lady, too."

"And who is the lady, Mrs. Jones? Come now," the girl went on coaxingly, affecting an interest she did not feel, for the wealthy Mrs Jones was a valuable customer. "You might as well say at once that it's yourself, for there isn't

another lady in Plymouth so well worth looking at as you."

Mrs. Jones bridled, blushed, and rolled her eyes about in the most approved manner of the underbred coquette, as she answered with a smirk :

"I, indeed! Don't you think I have had enough of matrimony? I thought I was going to be an old man's darling when I married Mr. Jones; but he was so strict and worshiped me so that he wouldn't let any other man look at me or speak to me. All Plymouth knows that, so you needn't think I am going to put my neck into a halter again, even for Mr. Edwards."

"Perhaps he'll tame you and break you without the halter, as he does the horses," the girl said slyly, and then, as Mrs. Jones' exhibition of silliness and vanity was becoming monotonous to her, she devoted all her energies to dilating on the beauties and merits of the silks and satins that were billowing over the counter.

"Very handsome! quite a gentleman! and endowed with almost magical power over a horse!" How exactly this description of him tallied with that given to her by Walter of a friend of his! but the friend's name and identity eluded her memory, and she gave up thinking any more of the matter as she hurried back to the hotel to carry May off to the railway station.

It was one of the open days at Bickleigh Vale, and a goodly number of fellow-tourists made their way by the same train to the same spot. May and Ella took neither interest in nor notice of these, but hurried away with their little luncheon basket to a small, semicircular, shrub-bordered slope of turf by the river, close to the bridge.

Ella had her sketching-pad and May a book, in which she was not *too* entirely absorbed. She was able and willing to withdraw her attention from its fascinating pictures of *unreal life* every few minutes, and gave it to the rippling

river, the sighing, soft wind that just ruffled the leaves on the trees, and the sweet, drowsy, insect-laden atmosphere. It was so seductively soothing and beautiful that May's love of life and action, of sport and pastime, of her four-footed fellow-creatures and the feats they enabled her to perform, was lying dormant.

"I could stay here in weather like this just as I am, through all time, without being either restless or discontented," she said languidly, throwing herself back against the bank with her arm over her head. "Why do you exert yourself to sketch, Ella? why don't you just 'be,' and nothing more?"

"You're generally down on me, if I'm idle for ten minutes," Ella said laughingly. "Now the mood's on me to work, I shall be able to make a pretty picture of this by and by. It will want a figure or two to give it life, though."

"Can't you put in two or three figures out of your own head?"

"No, I want every bit of it to be real. If the figures don't come, I won't put any in."

"They are coming now in obedience to some charm you have used, you little witch. Look at them! Creeping up toward the bridge."

May waved her hand as she spoke in the direction of the road across the river, that wound from the public way toward the bridge, and Ella, glancing in the direction indicated, saw a little cavalcade, composed of two men and a lady on horseback.

The trio reined up on the bridge, and the sound of their laughter and voices came floating on the air to the ears of the girls by the riverside some little distance below. They could not hear what the men said, but the tones of their voices struck some chords of memory in both girls, and it was with rather a disturbed face and manner that May rose up, saying:

"Let us saunter farther down stream. Passers-by on the bridge disturb the illusion of perfect solitude which I was reveling in just now."

Ella rose slowly, collected her drawing materials, and was turning to follow her friend when the voice of a woman on horseback, raised loudly, merrily, and coarsely, rang out with the words:

"Now Mr. Edwards, haven't I kept my promise, and brought you to an ideal place for you to come and spoon with your sweetheart, if you find one in Plymouth?"

"What a coarse wretch! Come quickly out of hearing of any more of her vulgarity," May said, speaking low and walking rapidly.

"I recognize her style and voice as those of a woman I heard declaiming over a counter to a girl in a shop this morning," Ella said, as she came up with her companion.

"Yes? What was she declaiming about?"

"Mr. Edwards, the horse-breaker. You would have been pleased, if you had heard her then, May; she seemed to appreciate the gentleman and his pluck and prowess well! quite as highly as you could yourself."

"I'm sure I should never be pleased with any view any woman took of anything, if she raved about it in a shop in the ghastly tones she used just now. It revolted me," May went on pettishly, "to hear her speaking to a man of this being an ideal place for him to 'come and spoon a sweetheart in.' I am sure she must be a horrible, coarse woman, and men who can stand her must be coarse and horrible, too."

"She addressed the man she was offering her refined suggestion to as 'Mr. Edwards'; so as two and two make four, I think if we put this and that together, we may take it for granted that it's none other than the man she was giggling and smirking about in the shop this morning, who is with her now."

"I don't like to look back; are they still on the bridge?"

"My dear May, it's not like you to ask anyone to do what you're ashamed of doing yourself. I don't like to look back, either."

"We can't hear them or distinguish them at this distance, so we can't be annoyed even if they are there still. We may as well sit down again, Ella."

"Here's a nice mossy bowlder that we can both sit on, but it's a nuisance our being driven away before I had finished my sketch! They are just riding slowly on, now; but, I declare! they've turned and are riding this way along the bank toward us."

"We're sufficiently low donw on the slope to escape their observation when they're passing. I can't tell why, but their vicinity and appearance annoys me, and has spoiled my pleasure in the day. It's that woman's coarse voice that has upset me. I have always *detested* loud-tongued women who laugh boisterously, and so did Ted Greg."

"What makes you quote him now apropos of the sprightly dame who, by the way, is just pointing us out with her whip to her two companions," Ella asked.

"I can't tell; he came into my mind, and would be spoken about," May said, trying to laugh. "Don't even so much as peep in the direction of those people. Oh! hear that woman's voice now, just above us; how it rasps me! She quite drowns the voices of her companions. I *feel* that those men are disgusted with her, they're so quiet."

As she spoke there came a burst of merriment from the party on the top of the bank, and then a loud, jocular man's voice was heard saying:

"By Jove, you're right, Mrs. Jones! Edwards will deserve a termagant when he does get a wife, to pay him out for the way in which he neglects women for horses, now."

Ella started to her feet, looking startled and stung, and at the same moment May whispered hurriedly:

"If I didn't know that Walter St. Austle was up in town for the first night of Guy's new play, I could have vowed that it was he speaking."

"When is the first night of Guy's new play?" Ella asked.

"Either this evening—or was it last night? I'm not quite sure which——"

"And I am quite sure it was Walter's voice. What *on earth* can bring him in contact with that odious woman?"

"And why on earth should he be preserved from contact with her any more than Mr. Edwards?" May asked coldly. "We hear Mr. Edwards is a gentleman! Why should this odious woman, as you very justly call her, be a more fitting companion for him than for Walter?"

"We all know that Walter is unassailable on every point, birth, breeding, education, and position," Ella said proudly. "And all we *know* of the other one is that he is a horse-breaker."

"Ichabod! the glory of the day has departed. Let us make our way to the train, and go back to Plymouth," May said wearily. Memory, love, hope, despair, and, worst of all, a strong sense of inability to abolish the existing order of dire uncertainty, were all seething within her. She wanted to get away anywhere from Bickleigh Vale; but when she got back to Plymouth, and found herself safely within the portals of the Royal Hotel, she felt just as uncertain, restless, and dissatisfied as ever.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"BUT A MAN."

"MAY! The St. Austles are here—here, in this very hotel!"

"Then it *was* Walter we saw at Bickleigh! But how do you know they are here?"

"As I was running along the corridor just now to tell you that if we are going to this horse show to-night, it's time we started, I ran into my stepmother's arms, literally ran into them, for she saw me before I saw her, and she caught me and kissed me, and cried over me, yes, she did! *cried* over me, and I don't think they were crocodile tears."

"Never mind her tears," May said impatiently; "tell me what she said about——"

"About Walter and Guy? Oh! she said they were traveling down with Walter to Trelyn, and that you and I must dine with them to-night, and then she whispered so sweetly and kindly, 'You have been a willful child, dear Ella, but now I have got you again, I hope I shall be able to make you happy in spite of your waywardness. Walter and you mustn't make each other miserable any longer.'"

"Oh! she's very sweet, and, of course, if she gives you such sugar-plums in the way of hopeful promises, you'll be very fond of her. Didn't she say anything about anyone else?"

"Yes; she said Guy would be so glad to see us again."

"Didn't she say anything about the man who was riding with Walter to-day?"

"Yes, I forgot to tell you that; it was Mr. Greg whom we saw," Ella said, with sudden constraint.

"How could you 'forget'?" May asked passionately. "It has been like water in a dry land to you to hear of Walter and to know that there is a chance of being reconciled

to him. Don't you think that it's the same with me about Mr. Greg?"

"I very much hoped that you had got over it," Ella said pityingly.

"Got over it! That would have been the wise and right and prudent thing to do—but I haven't done it."

"He has shown himself to be heartless and unprincipled in every way," Ella said warmly. "When my poor mother was alive he couldn't resist the temptation of responding to your love, and since her death he has shown absolute indifference to you. I wonder you haven't more spirit than to hanker after him still."

"I should feel the same contempt probably for another woman's infatuation for another man."

"And you will give up going to see him to-night and dine with the St. Austles instead—won't you?" Ella asked coaxingly.

"No, dear; but you can stay and dine with the St. Austles. I can quite well go alone."

"Shall you let him know you're there? It seems mean of me to desert you, but—I do want to show Mrs. Guy St. Austle that I have buried the hatchet. If I refuse her overtures now it——"

"Will be unpleasant when you become Walter's wife. You are quite right, Ella! Join the family party to-night, by all means, but don't try to persuade me to give up the little gleam of sunshine it will be for me just even to see my faulty friend again."

"I hope he won't see you, and want to renew it. You ought to do much better, May. Even if he gave up his wild ways——"

"How do you know his ways are wild?"

"Everyone says they are, and your own experience of him——"

"Goes to prove that he is no hero, but a man. I know

that well. Don't be afraid, though, my dear little Mentor. I will not obtrude myself upon Mr. Greg's notice, or in any way court my fate. But I mean to go and see his performance, and I must be off at once."

"Walter!" Mrs. Guy St. Austle said, as she came into their private room a few minutes before dinner, "I have a surprise for you—a pleasant one, I hope. Ella is here, and I have asked her and May Meredith to dine with us."

He gave a muttered exclamation of perplexity and confusion.

"Surely, surely, I have not done wrong?" she asked anxiously. "You gave me the impression that you were still attached to her, and that it was only her coldness and the sad circumstance of her mother's death which was making you hold aloof from her for a time. She is not cold about you any longer, of that I can assure you. Her face was such a lovingly tell-tale one, when I told her you were here and asked her to come to-night."

"There's been a long interim, you know, between the time when I really did love the little girl and now——"

"But, Walter——"

"A man may be forgiven for having grown less keen about a thing, when it has been refused to him, not once, but twice, without rhyme or reason. I wrote and wanted to have it on again after her mother's death, and she wouldn't."

"O Walter! and now you have got over it, and I have led her to hope, I am afraid. She is looking so pretty, your heart will go back to her when you see her."

"No, it won't—I mean it had much better not," he said uneasily. "By Jove! I don't think I'll see her at all, not to-night, at any rate. I'll dine in the coffee room and slip out to the theater or something afterward."

"But, Walter——"

"Don't try to persuade me, you'll only do harm," he said impatiently, and then, to her infinite chagrin, he got himself out of the room in time to avoid the meeting he so evidently dreaded with Ella.

Ella came in a few minutes after, with a fire in her mobile, sensitive face that her stepmother would have rejoiced to look upon, had it not been for the painful onus that was laid upon her of quenching it. Mrs. St. Austle, for the first and only time in her life, felt a guilty woman as she remembered that she had been the one to lure the girl on to entangle her feet in a net of deadly mortification.

"I have not kept you waiting, have I? I stayed trying to persuade May to come with me, but she had arranged to go somewhere else. It was so kind of you to ask me, for—I feel I've been a little beast to you always. I walked in the dark, you see, and stumbled," she added, with a faint, deprecating smile.

Mrs. St. Austle had her arm round Ella's neck, and her own sweet eyes looked steadily into Ella's brilliant ones as she answered:

"My dear child, don't accuse yourself with regard to me. You were only a loyal little daughter to your own mother, and I care for you all the more because you were so. I am sorry Miss Meredith couldn't come. As it is you must put up with only Guy and me. Walter is not dining with us to-night."

"Did you tell him I was coming?"

As she spoke Ella jerked herself unceremoniously out of her stepmother's embrace, and stood looking very fragile but very fierce, supporting herself with a nervously trembling hand against the mantelpiece.

"I told him, but it was too late for him to alter his arrangements."

"Or perhaps he didn't want to alter them? Why"—with an angry stamp of the foot—"did you humble me so? Why

did you make me come and show that I want to see him again, only to humble me and laugh at me?"

"Ella, I should deserve the heaviest humiliation that can fall on a woman, if I had done this thing that you charge me with. I thought that if Walter and you met, things would right themselves. He must feel as we all do, that you are a thousand times more worthy of being the wife of an honorable man, since you have proved yourself such a loyal daughter, than you were before——"

"But he doesn't want me for his wife any longer. At least it looks as if he had thought better of it, does it not?"

Mrs. St. Austle shook her head. "Walter gives me his absolute confidence, treats me exactly as if I were his sister, and so I am able to assure you, Ella, that you have *not* been superseded in his heart. Your last rebuff chilled him terribly, but he has not put another woman in your place."

"So he tells you?"

"Well, he has not exactly told me so, but if there had been another woman, either Guy or I would have heard of it."

"I do believe in him still, I do feel proud to think that I have reason to believe in him still," Ella cried ecstatically. "He's a splendid contrast to that man who ruined my poor mother's life, and made love to May Meredith while mother was still alive. May is still foolishly fond of him, though he's flirting and carrying on with a loud, wealthy widow in this place."

"I would rather not hear anything about Mr. 'Edwards', or Mr. 'Greg,' or whatever he calls himself now. He is a man for whom I have not a particle of respect, nor a bit of admiration. In fact, *I* think the women who adore him must be very coarse-minded, as what is there in him beyond his fine physique to adore?"

"My mother was not coarse-minded," Ella replied stiffly;

and perhaps it was well that Guy St. Austle came in at the moment to relieve the tension.

Guy St. Austle had been a very successful man for some time now. He had been successful as journalist, novelist, and dramatist, and success had not turned a hair of his head. The sudden spring from doubt, debt, and all the other disagreeables of impecuniosity, to a good balance at his banker's, and any number of signed agreements at a gorgeously remunerative rate, had not made him either reckless, dissipated, extravagant, or bumptious. But it had made him smug. He was aggravatingly well disposed toward everybody—especially toward himself and his wife. That is to say, he was exceedingly well disposed toward her when she fell in with all his views unquestioningly and unhesitatingly, and displayed warmth and unreserve toward himself, and a sharp frost toward the rest of the world. Now she had never been addicted to the display of either of these extremes, and he had known it when he married her. But it annoyed him now that neither the warmly unreserved, nor the frostily sharp manner, could be turned on at his order. These things being beyond his control, he found fault with minor matters in a way that made her feel she had a master.

Sometimes the truth would force itself upon her and compel her to admit that she had been a happier woman while she had been a prize unwon. In those days he had been patient with her, however much she tried his patience by her coldness and persistent evasion of him. He had been grateful, with sincere and manly gratitude, for the smallest concession she made and the slightest favor she showed to him. He had watched her ordering and regulating her own course of action about all things, and had felt and expressed profound respect and admiration for the way in which she did so order and regulate it. He had deferred to her judgment about everything—excepting when she had refused to marry

him. He had compelled her to believe that he was veracious when he told her that, without her, his life, however prosperous and free from other troubles, could never be anything but unfinished, blurred, and mutilated. Her independence of character, and the mingled strength and gentleness of her manner, had been the attributes which had won him to love her. Yet, now that she was his wife, they were the very attributes which brought jar and fret into their lives.

Now that she had surrendered and he had won the battle, he had in his innermost heart a grudge against her for having held out so long. If she had only married him five years before she did, she would then have been young enough to have been molded out of her faults and into the shape of his fancy. Besides, the uncertainty he had labored under, that desire of the moth for the star, which he had suffered from during all those years, had, he knew now, caused him to waste much valuable time which might have been more lucratively invested. That subtle mixture of strength and sweetness, which had so fascinated him in the woman he was pursuing, appeared to him now that he had won her, to have been a mere capricious frittering away of the most golden period of their lives.

In fact, he was disappointed. He had got his way after a great deal of trouble, and now that he had got it, she unreasonably insisted on remaining the same woman she had been before his will and way had conquered her. And he was further disappointed at her not having made him the father of a child, who might have brought that fullness into his life which she failed to supply.

On the other hand, while he was rasped and disappointed because she had not changed, she was at first startled and then bitterly grieved to find that he had. He scoffed at the possibility of her having or exercising an adverse opinion to his on any matters outside the house, and on many inside it

as well. Accordingly now, when he found Ella was their guest this night, he felt and showed disapprobation.

"It would have been much better if you had asked my advice before you acted on one of your confounded impulses," he took an early opportunity of saying to his wife. "No good can come now of throwing her in Walter's way again."

"Excepting that, if they are still fond of one another, they will find it out if they meet and——"

"'If' is a word I'm not very fond of using myself, but I'll just tell you this: 'if' you're wise, you'll not burn your fingers by intermeddling with the affairs of that little firebrand, your stepdaughter."

These being his sentiments, it was not possible that this first evening of Ella's readmission into the St. Austle family should be either profitable to her or pleasant to any of them. Guy thought the scheme of traveling which the two girls had projected, and were carrying out, romantic and a little ridiculous. Yet when Ella hinted that she thought, "May would be quite willing to go back to Belhaven at once, if she were advised to do so," Mr. St. Austle said that he should not think of advising either of them to be such weather-cocks as to relinquish a scheme before they had fairly embarked upon it.

"It's no use my pretending to say what May will or will not do," Ella said irritably. She was wounded by the slightly veiled light esteem in which Guy St. Austle so obviously held her, and she could not help remembering that she owed this estimate, which he had formed of her, to herself in a great measure.

"He can't be generous enough to realize that the mean way I behaved about Mrs. Poynter before he married her was due to jealousy. I fancied I liked him myself at the time; he might understand *that*, and at least not punish me for it now that I *know* I like his brother better. Oh! men

are mean! at least most men are." But though she made this sweeping assertion, she told herself that there were exceptions to the pitiful rule, and believed Walter to be one of them.

"Give my love to May, and tell her I hope she will have nothing more to say to that man if she does meet with him again," he said, when Ella rose at last to take her leave.

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the kind," she said quickly. Guy had thrown cold water on her own heart this night, and she had no inclination to aid him in douching anyone else. "Even if I did I should be too late; probably she has gone to his performance with the horses to-night, and most likely he will come round and speak to her after it's over."

"Most likely after it's over he will go to supper with Mrs. Jones, a lady with a lot of money and an incomprehensible desire to throw it away on every good-looking scamp who crosses her path. I had a word with Walter about that to-day. He has mixed himself up with Greg or Edwards, or whatever the man calls himself now, to such an extent that other people won't be able to sort their respective friends for them soon. Gossip will be dealing this lively dame, who, by virtue of her money, reigns as a kind of Queen of Merriment here, out to Walter if he doesn't look out."

A sharp pang of jealousy, that she felt to be groundless, shot through Ella.

"You're not in a good mood to-night, Mr. St. Austle; you won't even spare your brother."

"Guy works so unremittingly that he is nerve-tired by night—aren't you, dear?" his wife interposed, and he answered truthfully, but ungraciously, that he "was neither working hard nor nerve-tired, only d—d sick of seeing people making asses of themselves." Which sickness, after all, is the normal condition of many of us!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FALSE LIGHTS.

"I WANT you to come and have supper with me to-night, Ted."

Sir Walter St. Austle pushed his head into the room where Mr. Edwards, the most courageous, artistic, and successful horse-breaker who has ever exhibited his powers in England, was dressing for his first event.

Walter St. Austle had come straight away from the hotel after those few words, which have been recorded, had passed between his sister-in-law and himself. For a minute the temptation to meet little Ella again, and see for himself that she cared for him just as strongly and ungrudgingly as ever, had assailed him. But he had resisted it, and literally run away.

"I'll come, old man; but where?" Ted Greg said in answer to the invitation.

"Ah! She! Mrs. Jones'; she said I was to be sure and bring you."

"You know I've a morning performance to-morrow. This show in the morning doesn't work well with late suppers."

"Nonsense! You must feed somewhere after it."

"To tell you the truth, St. Austle, I would rather go straight back to my own quarters, have some deviled bones and a bottle of Bass, and get off to bed. I've got some hard work before me to-night—a three-year-old, three parts bred 'un, who kicks the stars down, they tell me, whenever he's been tackled. I haven't looked at the youngster yet, but I hear he's sixteen-two, and as strong as a young bull. Let me off the supper to-night!"

"Mrs. Jones thinks already that you don't like her. She'll be awfully annoyed at your not coming. I've spoken

to her of your being such a friend of mine that she is quite ready to accept you as a friend of hers, too."

"All right! I'll come. I must go on, St. Austle," Greg said hurriedly; but he smiled to himself as he entered the arena, and the thought that crossed his mind was:

"Glad to accept me as a friend of his, is she? Well! if she behaves decently to him, he will never know from me how hard she has tried to turn me into a friend of her own."

He excelled himself this night in all that he attempted to do. Some influence seemed to be around him which made his vision keener than ever, and added strength to his arm. At last, when the vicious three-year-old, whom he had pledged himself to conquer and ride in twenty minutes, was led in, kicking and plunging savagely, he threw one swift glance round the house, and there in a box by herself, he saw the "influence" which had already made its magnetic power felt. In very truth he felt his strength grow to be the strength of ten as he gazed for an instant into the steady, true eyes that had no hateful tricks of drooping or languishing—no artful devices of side glance or lowered eyelash—about them. He knew they were the eyes of a woman who did not shrink from letting the man she loved read all the secrets of her heart. "I am that man," he thought exultantly; and then the exultation was subdued by his honest feeling of regret that "for her sake he had not been a better fellow."

Of course he triumphed, and won rounds of applause that night. No creator of fictitious characters could have the heart to put even such a faulty favorite as Ted into such a position before the lady of his love without making him fill it brilliantly. Ted did this, and though May was heartsick over and over again, she nerved herself to bear without wincing the sight of the dangers he courted at far too brief intervals. Some women in the house who did not know

him, but who shrank from the probability of seeing a fellow-creature's brains kicked out by the armed hoof of an infuriated horse, screamed hysterically more than once. And for this mark of sympathy May could have killed them, as it made him withdraw his eyes and attention for an instant from the struggling horse, which on each occasion promptly seized the opportunity of lashing out at him with teeth and hoof. But the end was safety and success, and as May ran down to the exit, with the intention of getting into a cab and away before he could come upon her unawares, she felt glad that she had come; glad that she had beaten down the silly pride which had at first revolted at the idea of seeing him, her friend, making pastime for the public.

But cabs were few, and those that were there were engaged. She was turning despondently into the not too well lighted street, wondering if she could find her way back to the hotel without a guide, when she almost ran against Sir Walter St. Austle.

"You here alone, May? I thought you dined with Guy and his wife to-night?" he exclaimed, in not too delighted accents, as he piloted his old friend through the little crowd who were hanging around to see "Edwards" come out.

"Ella is dining with them; I preferred coming to see this."

"Recognized your old chum, did you? Wait for a minute and he will be out. I am going to carry him off to supper, but we must see you safely back to your diggings. Where are you staying?"

"At the Royal."

"The deuce you are!" he said vexedly, thinking how he could creditably avoid meeting Ella in the morning.

She had no time to notice his manner, or make any mental comment on it, for Ted Greg had come out and joined them.

Very few words passed between them; their hearts were

too full for words, but as he took his place next to her, quite naturally, edging Walter St. Austle outside, he said, as he pressed her hand firmly :

"I am glad you were there—at last."

"And I am glad I went—at last. Perhaps you would have counted me among your audience before if you had not sailed under false colors."

"False colors ?"

"A feigned name ! Why hadn't you the courage of your necessities ? Why don't you do, what you do so pluckily, honorably, and well, as 'Mr. Greg ?'"

"It is by my *entrepreneur's* desire that I call myself Edward Edwards. Those fellows always seem to think that any other name is more like to draw than a fellow's own. If you are born Smith, they suggest advertising you as Jones. By the way, St. Austle, I shall do myself the honor of seeing Miss Meredith safely home ; I know you have got an engagement."

"I'll walk along with you, and we will go there together, later on."

"Not a bit of it ; you go there now and report yourself, or I shall be in the lady's black books for having let you wait for me."

"It's all very fine your saying that, but she wants you as much as she does me," St. Austle said crossly. He was not sure of how he stood with the lady Crœsus, but he was very nearly sure of how he wished to stand with her. In fact, to cut the explanation short, Sir Walter St. Austle was tired of the cramped existence which his former extravagant generosities and follies had obliged him to lead. He was longing once more to hold up his head in the front ranks of country gentlemen, notorious sportsmen and lavish entertainers. None of these things could he do comfortably, or, indeed, at all, without money, and Mrs. Jones had abundance of it, apparently waiting his acceptance.

Ella's inopportune reappearance had disturbed him considerably this evening. He had for a long time felt himself to be perfectly free in all respects concerning her, and no longer honor bound in any way to repeat his offer. But his sister-in-law's remarks had made him feel doubtful and discomfited, and so he had wanted Ted Greg's protecting presence at the supper to which Mrs. Jones had invited him.

He had told himself a dozen times in the course of the last few days that Mrs. Jones was "a deuced fine woman, quite up to date, and altogether one of the right sort." But somehow or other he did not want to be made the happiest of men just yet by her promise to marry him. Accordingly he clung, like a child uncertain of its steps, to any object that intervened to check his perilous course. The object to-night happened to be Ted Greg, and no amount of plausible persuasion on the part of either the latter or May could induce St. Austle to leave them.

But when they reached the hotel, May routed and defeated him. With her most engaging smile she told them as they stood in the hall what a nice drawing room she and Ella had, and added :

"If you will come up and see it, I am sure we shall find Ella is back from dining with your brother and his wife. Will you come, both of you ?"

"Thanks—delighted," Greg assented hastily, but St. Austle hesitated. He was sufficiently compromised with Mrs. Jones to make seeing Ella a very doubtful blessing. Moreover, so slippery is man, that he no longer wished to see her. He preferred the contemplation of the very solid comforts that would flow to him out of Mrs. Jones' freely opened money bags.

He made one more appeal for help, however.

"I shall get frozen out by Mrs. Jones if I go without you, Greg ; but *one* of us, at least, must put in an appearance——"

"Certainly, and you're the one she wants to do it," Greg acquiesced.

"I am not so sure of that. May, I shan't forgive you in a hurry for making this fellow break faith with me, and throw over one of the most charming and hospitable women in the world."

"Yes, you will forgive me to-morrow when you come to see Ella and me. Good-night, I hope you'll enjoy your supper. You ought to, for you'll have a double share of everything, including the society of one of the most charming and hospitable women in the world."

"I score certainly on the last point, for she never looks at me when Ted's by." St. Austle laughed as he ran off, but his last words left a sting in May's breast, and there was a perceptible diminution of warmth in her manner as she led the way to her sitting room.

"No Ella here, how tiresome! I thought, of course, she would be back before now. It must be ever so late."

"I fear the evening has been long to you. It is only eleven."

His tone was cool and constrained, for he was deeply pained by the change in her manner, and did not for one moment suspect that jealousy was causing it.

She fidgeted in front of the glass for a minute or two, running her fingers through the little fringe of her pretty fair hair. Then she turned to him, and mistaking his pained reserve for coldness, she asked:

"Who is this Mrs. Jones with whom you have made yourself so conspicuous?"

"*I* made myself conspicuous?" He repeated her words with an accent of angry wonder, then went on more temperately.

"She is a very rich, very kind, and hospitable woman, who has shown a good deal of attention to St. Austle and myself while we have been knocking about here."

"I am sure she has," dryly. "I saw you riding with her to-day."

"Then it *was* you we saw at Bickleigh," he cried delightedly. "I felt sure that it was, but St. Austle said it couldn't be. If he had not overruled me and told me I should be given in charge for audacity and impertinence, I should have been over the bank to you in a moment."

"And that horrid—I mean that woman would have been over the bank with you."

He was laughing now, and did not think that she was in earnest and growing angry.

"Yes, by Jove! I believe she would; she doesn't stick at a trifle, she goes very straight. But never mind Mrs. Jones. I'll come and fetch you to-morrow, and you will come to the stable and see my horses, won't you?"

"Will Mrs. Jones be there?"

"Very likely, she often comes around with St. Austle—she's fond of horses."

"How convenient for you, having Walter St. Austle here."

"Why 'convenient'? It's very pleasant. Not too many of my old chums have stuck to me while I have been down. St. Austle has done so like a brick, all through."

"And you think I haven't," she cried eagerly, being sensitively alive to understand—and alas! to misunderstand all his changes of feeling about her. "Ah! you don't know how I have 'stuck to you' in reality, through everything. But never mind that now. Tell me more about your Mrs. Jones."

"She is not my Mrs. Jones, at all," he was saying in a tone of annoyance, when Ella came in and his explanation died away.

"*You* here! I am astonished," she said in reply to his greeting of, "Ah, Ella! how are you?" She could not refuse his outstretched hand, but she barely touched it, and

strong disapproval of his presence was marked in every line of her expressive little face. Perhaps she would not have felt such strong disapproval if she had not heard him say, "She is not my Mrs. Jones, at all," or if Guy's remarks had not imbued her with the idea that it was Mr. Ted Greg who was responsible for the guileless "Sir Walter" being thrown at all into the obnoxious Mrs. Jones' society. As it was, she looked reproachfully at May as if the latter were being guilty of a breach of every written and unwritten law of propriety, and said aggressively to the embarrassed guest:

"Everyone who is not staying in the hotel is clearing out now. Are *you* staying here, Mr. Greg?"

"I am not," he said. "So I suppose I must be off?" he added dejectedly, and then, after receiving a faint clasp of the hand and a fainter smile from May, he went away, leaving May imbued with the agonizing conviction that he would, after all, sup with Mrs. Jones that night.

"What made you so cool to Mr. Greg, Ella? After all, what has he done to you that you should try to snub him?"

May spoke testily. She might distrust, be cool to, and snub Ted Greg herself, but she would not permit anyone else do it without resenting the offense.

Ella's answer was not conducive to the establishment of peace, for she, too—like the majority—had her corroding and unpublishable sorrow.

"We won't go into the subject of what he has done to me. If *you* have forgotten my mother and *her* wrongs, *I* haven't. But I'll tell you this! I am cool to Mr. Greg because he is using Walter St. Austle as a blind about that Mrs. Jones. She has heaps of money, you know, and he wants to show her that he numbers men of family and position among his acquaintances, as it would naturally be 'a splendid thing for him to get hold of her and her dollars,' as Guy says."

"*How dare* Guy say it?" May asked, shivering with a

combination of those drastic emotions, doubt, rage, and jealousy.

"He says it because—because he is annoyed that Walter should be led astray by his good-nature, to seem to be on terms with people who are not on the same social platform as himself," Ella said loftily. You see she was only a woman! and, in her yearning desire to put the case comfortably for herself, she overstated it.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"WILL YOU?"

SIR WALTER ST. AUSTLE felt very much like running away from the sumptuous temptation which he knew awaited him as soon as he had touched the electric bell. This half-formed resolution was nipped in the bud, however. The door slid open as if by magic, and a low-voiced, carefully trained servant in plain clothes murmured that his mistress was waiting supper, and took off the visitor's hat and coat before the latter's eyes had got accustomed to the "burning daylight" which illumined the hall.

Externally and internally it was one of the prettiest and most picturesque houses in the place. The architect had been a man of decision, and had refused to permit a jerry-builder to have the carrying into execution plans that were the outcome of a profound belief in the creed which teaches that the Beautiful is the Useful. Artistic taste and common sense had combined to plan out a house which fulfilled every requirement of the most fastidious inhabitant it was likely to have. And the "Liberty of the West" had furnished it in that ingratiating style which, without binding itself rigorously to any particular period, blends and assim-

ilates all that is best in each as harmoniously as does time itself.

It was a tall, massive, big-hipped, high-breasted, short-throated—rather blowsy—but still striking looking woman who came hurriedly to meet him with a vivid smile, and a sharp-tongued inquiry as to "what he had been doing with himself—and why the other fellow hadn't come with him?" She slipped her hand through his arm as she spoke, and as he answered, "I left him amusing himself with an old flame—you're not going to be angry with me for having come without him, are you?"—she drew him rapidly across the drawing room and into a cozy little tent-shaped room, in which, on a round table, under an admirably tempered light, a dainty little supper, arranged for three, was laid.

It had been her design to dazzle one or other of these two men, whom she had asked to be her guests this night, into "coming to the point," and she had spared no pains in carrying out that design. Her house and its appointments, her cook's capabilities, her cellar and the service rendered by her servants, were each and all above suspicion and beyond reproach. But this night it was not so much on these well ascertained, powerful factors in her scheme of subjugation, which she relied, as on the evidences which she hoped to give of her being something better and more attractive than a merely rich woman, who would do as she pleased with her money. She wanted to show that she could not only purchase beautiful things *ad libitum*, but that she could imagine and create beauty out of her intense individual sense of it. For she recognized that, in a way, each one of these men had artistic and refined proclivities. To one these had come, avowedly, by inheritance. To the other they had come, undoubtedly, but how she did not know.

So when she had seen that her table was faultlessly arranged, as far as fair linen, brilliant glass, gleaming silver,

and food that was fit for Queen Titania—and also for the more robust members of that lady's court—went, Mrs. Jones took it upon herself to paint in the floral decorations with her own hands, and to choose her own attire as high priestess of the little ceremony! The result was that she came to meet Sir Walter St. Austle in a dress that fitted her well-developed person so tightly that it frightened him; while as for the flowers, St. Austle never knew how wonderfully and fearfully they could be made to look before. She had, with characteristic good-nature, remembered the individual tastes of each man as he had expressed them with regard to flowers, and gathered them all together for their benefit. So silver cornucopias held, tightly wedged together, orchids that resembled spiders and crabs artlessly encircled by the simple blue forget-me-nots, while tightly packed bowls of roses had little bunches of the wild wood anemone standing up in withered confusion all over them.

After all, he told himself presently, what did it matter whether a woman chose to put herself into fashionable armor that hurt her horribly, so long as she paid for it herself and it didn't hurt him? He could have wished that the dress which compressed her so had not been of *quite* such a vivid blue, and he also could have wished that the arms which came out of the wide, puffed sleeves had not been *quite* so highly colored, and large. "They're about the size of Ella's waist," he caught himself thinking, but luckily, at the moment, the flames which licked out from the diamonds on Mrs. Jones' arms distracted his attention. Those diamonds represented something which was needful to him, and which Ella could never supply. So he looked up from them to the dark, flashing eyes of the lady of his speculation, and said:

"I *am* forgiven for Greg's defalcation, am I not? You are willing to accept me for myself for an hour or two?"

"*For* as many hours as you like; I hate beating about

the bush and humbug of any kind. I wanted *you* to be my guest to-night, and you *are* my guest! What more can the heart of woman desire? I want you to try those larks! The way they're dressed is 'by the inspiration of the devil,' in French, and they are really worth trying!"

"As anything and everything about you is," he said gallantly. The diamonds and diabolically dressed larks were weaving their spells around him. At the same time he wished her arms were not quite so ruddy and muscular, and that she did not dress in bright blue. But these were mere flimsy details. The diamonds, the demoniacally inspired larks, and all the other atoms which went to make up a perfect whole, represented hard cash—and hard cash was what Sir Walter St. Austle of Trelyn wanted.

She laughed in her noisy, frank, self-assertive way.

"You think I am worth trying, do you? Well, a good many other men have thought the same thing since poor Mr. Jones went under, leaving his 'Lollie,' as he called me, to fight the world, the devil, and man, single-handed. But —you may be surprised to hear it—I am rather particular. I intend to be taken for myself alone, independently of the money my late husband's forethought and generosity secured to me. You're not drinking your champagne; isn't it dry enough? It's a guinea a bottle; but money doesn't always get what's exactly to one's taste, does it?"

A ready assent to this proposition was on his lips, but he checked it.

"The man who takes you for yourself alone will have a glorious bargain," he said emphatically.

She grew more animated at once, and cast away reserve in a way that would have been pretty and touching—in a girl!

"You think so, Sir Walter? Well, I'm not a vain woman, but I have always been told by fortune tellers and 'planchette,' and things of that kind, that I should win a 'wholehearted and unselfish love in my maturity.'"

"In your 'maturity'—that's a long time to look forward to," he said gallantly, and he felt such a sneak as he said it.

"Well, in my prime, then, I will say. I am past silly girlhood, any man must see that. But my heart is as young as ever, and will give back warm love for warm love as truly now as it would have done a dozen years ago."

"Will it give it back to me?"

"That it will," she cried rapturously, holding out both her hands to him. "Now you're sure of yourself and your own wishes, I hope, for I'm not a woman to be played with! This is a genuine offer, and not silly, idle gallantry?"

"Mrs. Jones, can you suspect me of being such a cad as to be insincere in such a matter as this, and at the same time seriously think of accepting me as your husband?"

She laughed in a vexed, confused way, was silent for a few moments, and then said:

"I like to have things in writing, Sir Walter. Spoken words get forgotten sometimes; written ones are more satisfactory. I have pen, ink, and paper handy."

She drew a little occasional table which stood by her chair nearer to him, picked up a pen, dipped it in ink, and handed it to Sir Walter, saying:

"It's a mere formality, but as I shall have to talk to my lawyer to-morrow about the disposition of my property, in the event of my marriage, I shall like to have your offer in writing."

She was very firm and self-possessed; perhaps these qualities would not have appealed to him so strongly, and impressed him so favorably as they did, had she not been very rich also. As it was, he gave one thought to Ella, but he wrote the letter as Mrs. Jones desired.

"You don't really mean, May, that you are going to that man's stable to look at his horses?"

"*Indeed,* I do, Ella, if he keeps his appointment and

comes to fetch me this morning as he promised. And you're going to be a dear little girl, and come with us?"

"With *you*, yes, if you want me; but you mustn't bracket yourself with Mr. Greg. How will you like it if Mrs. Jones is there to meet you?"

"I don't know."

"Then I will tell you. You won't like it at all. You will be horribly jealous, for you care for that man still."

"Don't speak of him as 'that man,' Ella. It sounds so very disparaging."

"I want to disparage him."

"If Mrs. Jones is there I shall very quickly see if there is anything between Ted and her, or not. If there is, I promise you I will not see him again."

"And if there is not anything between them?"

"Then I promise you I will see him again."

"I am afraid you are only going to meet mortification, May. Mrs. Jones is exactly one of those loud, fast, self-assertive women who would appeal to the taste of that man."

"Your mother was neither loud, fast, nor self-assertive, yet she appealed to his taste!"

"I wish he would take her and marry her and have done with it. He has been the means of bringing her in contact with Walter St. Austle, and I have no doubt that some of the gossips of the place couple her name with his. It would be like their audacity if they do," Ella said wrathfully, and at the same moment Mr. Greg was announced.

"Did you enjoy your supper last night?" May asked, when they had shaken hands.

"Very much, thank you."

"And was Mrs. Jones very angry with you for being late?"

"I didn't go there."

"Didn't you, really?" May cried joyfully. "Now we

will go and get our hats on, and pay our visit to your horses."

"How absurdly your spirits have gone up because he kept away from the woman for one evening," Ella grumbled, as she followed May along the corridor. "I think it was very mean of him not to have gone, letting poor Sir Walter in for spending the time with that woman alone."

"I forgive him the meanness at any rate," May laughed.

"I wish you would go without me, May. I don't feel like going out this morning. I want to have a chat with Mrs. St. Austle. Will you spare me?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," May said blithely. The prospect of the walk alone with Ted was anything but displeasing to her.

"Then we'll settle it so," said Ella, cheering up a little at the thought of possibly meeting Sir Walter in his sister-in-law's apartments.

It struck May that Mr. Greg was unusually grave as they walked away from the hotel toward the by-street in which the stables were situated, and so with her customary frankness she said:

"There is something the matter with you, I am sure. Have you something to tell me which you think I shall not like to hear?"

"I have."

Her heart sank, but she would hear the worst at once.

"Tell me quickly; is it about yourself?"

"No, but it is news that will pain you on Ella's account. St. Austle came round to my quarters this morning to tell me that Mrs. Jones settled his hash for him last night. In other words, he has got engaged to her. The fact is, he is hard up; you know what a generous chap he has been all his life."

May shivered. "Poor little Ella!" she said sorrowfully; "it will be very, very hard for her, much worse than it would have been if Mrs. St. Austle had not raised her hopes

again. So he is going to marry for money! and poor Ella believes him to be the soul of chivalry and honor. In fact she was deploring this morning that Walter should have been let in for *knowing* Mrs. Jones, even by you."

Mr. Greg smiled. "It is quite the other way round. St. Austle let me in for knowing Mrs. Jones, and a very kind, hospitable woman I have found her."

"And you have never tried to rival your friend?"

"What, *I?* No, no! I should never marry for money only. Indeed, the fact of the woman I love having money would make me hesitate to ask her to marry me—an impecunious poor devil, who has to risk his life every day of it for the bare pittance that enables him to exist."

"I am going to do such an unwomanly thing," May whispered, with a little gulp of emotion. "If you won't ask the woman you love to marry you because she happens to be better off than you are—well, she must ask you! Ted, will you?"

Can anyone entertain a doubt, even for a moment, what Ted's answer was?

A few hours after this Mrs. St. Austle and May were siting on either side of the bed on which a poor, crumpled-up little figure was lying. They had broken it to her as mercifully as possible, but hers was a tempestuous nature, and the blow to her pride, vanity, and love had stricken her to the dust. She could not remember that she had repulsed this man when he had sought her and pleaded for her eagerly and passionately. She could only remember that she had loved him very much, and that he had given her to understand that his life's devotion was hers, whether she would accept it or not. And now he was going to marry a woman at whom she had jeered and sneered, and whom she had attributed to Mr. Greg in a partly condescending and partly insulting way.

"My mother will love me always, because I wouldn't give her up for him," was poor little Ella's last coherent utterance. No one knows whether the overdose that killed her was taken by accident or design, but when Mrs. Jones heard of it she refused to marry Sir Walter St. Austle.

THE END.

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